

**POPULAR PROTEST IN NORTH AFRICA AND THE MIDDLE EAST (VIII):
BAHRAIN'S ROCKY ROAD TO REFORM**

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POPULAR PROTEST IN NORTH AFRICA AND THE MIDDLE EAST (VIII): BAHRAIN'S ROCKY ROAD TO REFORM

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Following a spasm of violence, Bahrain faces a critical choice between endemic instability and slow but steady progress toward political reform. The most sensible way forward is to launch a new, genuine dialogue in which the political opposition is fairly represented and to move toward changes that will turn the country into a constitutional monarchy. In order to create an environment in which such talks could succeed, the regime should take immediate steps to address the human rights crisis, including by releasing political leaders jailed for peacefully expressing their views, and reverse the alarming sectarian polarisation that has occurred.

In February and March 2011, Bahrain experienced peaceful mass protests followed by brutal repression, leaving a distressing balance sheet: over 30 dead, mostly demonstrators or bystanders; prominent opposition leaders sentenced to lengthy jail terms, including eight for life; hundreds of others languishing in prison; torture, and at least four deaths in detentions; trials, including of medical professionals, in special security courts lacking even the semblance of due process of law; over 40 Shiite mosques and other religious structures damaged or demolished; the country's major independent newspaper transformed into a regime mouthpiece; a witch hunt against erstwhile protesters who faced dismissal or worse, based on "loyalty" oaths; serious damage to the country's economy; a parliament left without its opposition; and much more. More significant for the long term perhaps, the violence further polarised a society already divided along sectarian lines and left hopes for political reform in tatters, raising serious questions about the island's stability.

The regime – a Sunni monarchy headed by the Al Khalifa family – gave a pseudo-legal cast to the repression it unleashed by issuing a "law of national safety", emergency legislation that permitted some of the human rights violations listed above. And it enveloped itself in the protective embrace of its neighbours, fellow members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), avowedly to ward off a victory by the perceived proxies of Iran, its own Shiite population.

As the crisis escalated in the second half of February and first half of March, two parallel battles unfolded within the opposing camps: a reformist crown prince wagered his political future on reaching out to a pragmatic segment of the (mostly Shiite) opposition, angering more hard-line regime elements, including the septuagenarian uncle of the king, who is the world's longest-sitting unelected prime minister. In turn, the largest licensed opposition society, Al-Wifaq, risked alienating its popular base, including many of the protesters gathered at the central Pearl roundabout in Manama, by agreeing to engage in informal, semi-secret talks with the crown prince.

While mostly calling for political reform leading to a constitutional monarchy in the uprising's early days, protesters steadily began to embrace the more radical demand for the regime's replacement with a democratic republic, and they began to radiate throughout the capital to bolster this demand. Feeling threatened, the regime lashed back. This spelled the end of talk about dialogue and reform and weakened dialogue's main protagonists. Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad appears marginalised within the royal family, at least for the time being; Al-Wifaq is struggling to hold onto its popular base, as it seeks to keep reform prospects alive while opposition leaders remain in jail and repression continues.

Under pressure from its Western allies, mostly the U.S. and UK, and seeking to recover from the shock to its economy, King Hamad bin Isa lifted the emergency law on 1 June, agreed to an independent international investigation of the events of February and March and ordered a "national consensus dialogue", which began on 5 July. While on their face these are positive developments, the lifting of the state of emergency and the start of a national dialogue appear designed more to placate these same allies than to significantly alter the regime's approach toward its own citizens.

Repression has eased but not ended, and none of the worst excesses – the lengthy prison sentences for political offences, job dismissals based on participation in peaceful protests, mosque destruction – have been reversed. Foreign

troops remain on Bahraini soil, with the prospect of a prolonged GCC military presence at some level. And the “national consensus dialogue” appears to strive for neither consensus among an inclusive group representative of society nor genuine dialogue between opponents; so far it has been instead an exercise in make-belief. The only positive development that has the potential to trigger a course correction is the independent commission, headed by international war crimes expert Cherif Bassiouni, but it is not expected to complete its work until the end of October.

There is reason to fear that Bahrain is heading for prolonged political stalemate, enforced by a heavy security presence backed by foreign troops and punctuated by protests when circumstance permits. The consequences could be costly. Already, divisions between Sunnis and Shiites are deeper than ever; many Shiites have a family member or friend killed or in jail. By oppressing Shiites as a group, the regime is erecting communal boundaries; by closing off any avenue of political participation and targeting even moderate opposition groups such as Al-Wifaq, it is laying the groundwork for a potential future uprising. In this tense atmosphere, any further provocation or violent action could trigger an explosion; unfortunately, hardliners in both the Shiite and Sunni communities as well as within the regime seem to be preparing for precisely this.

Further repression and violence will not unlock this complex political equation or defuse this combustible situation. The better alternative is for the parties to find a path to dialogue and inter-communal accommodation, paving the way for a constitutional monarchy that treats its subjects as citizens with full political rights. As a first step, the regime should take a series of confidence-building measures, including freeing those arrested for their participation in peaceful protest, ending its stigmatisation of the Shiite community and halting the practice of destroying or damaging Shiite mosques and prayer houses.

Backed by Saudi Arabia and other GCC states, the regime will not contemplate such measures in the absence of a combination of pressures. Some are likely to occur no matter what. Already, the regime is aware of mounting economic cost after investments shrank, businesses suffered a downturn in their profits, banks began contemplating the possible relocation of their operations, and major events were cancelled, such as Formula One's annual Grand Prix. But this alone is unlikely to produce a change, as it seems to believe it can survive economically as long as oil prices remain high, and Saudi Arabia maintains financial support.

Should it remain inflexible, the royal family also in all probability will confront pressure in the form of renewed protests by those who have been discriminated economically and marginalised politically, mostly members of the majority Shiite population. This could well be effective, but only if

opposition leaders can persuade their followers and other protesters to continue to pursue peaceful means.

Finally, Western states and notably the U.S. have a key role to play. Washington, which has enormous assets and interests in the Gulf, including Bahrain, would do well to step up its efforts, in coordination with influential allies such as the UK, to persuade the regime to loosen the reins and institute meaningful reform. Failing such steps, and facing an Al Khalifa family unresponsive to its entreaties, the U.S. should also be prepared to take more dramatic action, including a reduction in its military support. For its part, the opposition should seek to reassure the royal family, and the Sunni community that largely supports it, that it seeks an expansion of political rights, not the monarchy's overthrow, and that it accepts the concessions offered by the crown prince in mid-March as the starting point for negotiations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To the Government of Bahrain:

1. Establish an environment for direct dialogue leading toward meaningful political reform, including by:
 - a) freeing all those jailed for the peaceful expression of their views, including those already sentenced and especially including opposition leaders;
 - b) ending all trials by special security courts and retrying those convicted by such courts in regular criminal courts;
 - c) ceasing destruction of Shiite mosques, on any ground, and providing licenses regulating their construction; and
 - d) reinstating those dismissed for participation in peaceful protests, absence from work during the height of the crisis or other reasons linked with the February and March events.
2. Start a genuine and broad-based dialogue with the opposition, participated in by leaders (including those currently in prison) of all political groups, licensed or unlicensed, with a view to reaching agreement on meaningful political reform, based on the seven points agreed to by the crown prince on 13 March.
3. Distance itself publicly from sectarian rhetoric, prohibit government officials and state-owned news channels from using such rhetoric and actively discourage all citizens from employing it.
4. End sectarian discrimination in government recruitment, including in the security services, army and National Guard, as well as the diplomatic service and senior government positions.

5. Provide full access to the Bassiouni commission of investigation, make public its findings once it completes its work and implement its recommendations.
6. Hold accountable members of the security forces found to have broken the law or otherwise to have committed abuses of human rights in dealing with popular protests.

To Bahraini Opposition Groups:

7. Keep protests peaceful and refrain from inflammatory rhetoric.
8. Participate in dialogue with the regime, assuming it is genuine, as well as with non-Shiite political societies such as the National Unity Gathering, with a view to reaching agreement on meaningful political reform.
9. Make clear that they seek an expansion of political rights not the monarchy's overthrow and accept the concessions offered by the crown prince in mid-March as the starting point for negotiations.

To Youth Activists:

10. Keep protests peaceful and refrain from inflammatory rhetoric.

To Members of the Gulf Cooperation Council:

11. Withdraw troops deployed in Bahrain at the earliest possible time and, until then, keep them from any role in internal policing.
12. Insist that Bahrain adhere to international human rights standards.
13. Refrain from inflammatory sectarian rhetoric.

To the U.S. and other Western Governments:

14. Press Bahrain to adhere to international human rights standards and publicly criticise the government for violations, including but not limited to arbitrary arrest, incommunicado detention, torture, excessive use of force and suppression of freedom of expression and peaceful assembly.
15. Press Bahrain to release unconditionally anyone detained solely in connection with pro-democracy and anti-government protests, unless there is evidence they may have been responsible for a recognisable criminal offense.
16. Encourage both the government and opposition to engage in direct and genuine dialogue with a view to reaching an agreement on meaningful reform within the framework of a constitutional monarchy.
17. Suspend security assistance, including commercial sales of military and police equipment, until the government

ends its human rights violations and takes genuine steps toward meaningful political dialogue.

To the Government of Iran:

18. Distance itself publicly from sectarian rhetoric and prohibit government officials and state-owned news channels from resorting to such rhetoric.

Manama/Washington/Brussels, 28 July 2011

POPULAR PROTEST IN NORTH AFRICA AND THE MIDDLE EAST (VIII): BAHRAIN'S ROCKY ROAD TO REFORM

I. INTRODUCTION

On 14 February 2011, loosely organised youth groups marched toward Pearl Roundabout, a central Manama landmark. Inspired by mass movements for democratic change sweeping the Arab world, they had called for demonstrations on Facebook, demanding reform of the regime (*islah al-nizam*), though some went so far as to call for its downfall (*isqat al-nizam*). The date they chose, only three days after the ouster of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, was not random: it held huge symbolic significance, marking ten years since King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa had announced his reform project, the National Action Charter. In anticipation of large national celebrations of joy for the anniversary, the regime had covered Bahrain's streets with banners and posters praising the king for his wisdom and support of reform. The decision to plan protests on that date, therefore, was a slap in the face of the king and the entire Al Khalifa family.¹

Several intertwined dynamics unfolded in the months that followed. As protesters' demands grew by the day, a rift emerged between, on one side, the established opposition political societies and, on the other side, a loose alliance of youth groups and unlicensed societies. While the legal opposition agreed to sit down with the regime to seek a path forward through dialogue, the protesters and banned political societies escalated their demands from reform to the regime's downfall. At the same time, the royal family's political outlook increasingly came to be dominated by hardliners, led by the prime minister, who saw semi-secret deliberations with the opposition led by Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa as a sign of weakness and the demonstrations as an affront they wanted to crush.

In mid-March, the king invited in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) troops as a way to protect the royal family's rule from a perceived growing threat from the protesters, who were radiating out from the Pearl Roundabout to symbolically charged sites throughout the capital. The regime

also claimed it was threatened by Iran which, it asserted, sought to take advantage of Shiite assertiveness to draw Bahrain into its sphere of influence. The GCC forces, which entered barracks the moment they arrived on the island and apparently have remained there, also provided cover for the king to impose a state of emergency on 15 March and unleash a wave of repression, which put a stop to the protests.

In response to international condemnation and pressure, the regime lifted the state of emergency on 1 June and began to phase out some of its harshest tactics. A month later, on 9 July, the speaker of parliament convened a large gathering in response to the king's invitation to start a "National Dialogue". Whether this exercise would contribute to long-promised reforms was an open question: the forum had no powers to advise, much less decide; the opposition was scarcely represented; and some key opposition leaders remained in jail, sentenced by special security courts.

¹ For an account of the events see, Crisis Group Middle East and North Africa Report N°105, *Popular Protests in North Africa and the Middle East (III): The Bahrain Revolt*, 6 April 2011, p. 6.

II. AT THE PRECIPICE

A. ESCALATION

After three weeks of peaceful demonstrations in a centrally located Manama traffic intersection, the Pearl roundabout, the struggle between regime and protesters intensified significantly in mid-March. The mood at the roundabout had rapidly radicalised, with mounting demands that culminated in the call to remove the monarchy. The protesters were motivated in part by police violence in suppressing the demonstrations, especially in their early days; by the appearance of pro-regime thugs (*baltajiya*) armed with clubs and other implements who tried to disrupt peaceful protests and provoke a violent response; but also by their sense that if they held out long enough they might succeed, just as protesters in Tunisia and Egypt had. Moreover, the semi-secret talks between the largest licensed opposition group, Al-Wifaq, and Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad al-Khalifa, had not produced evidence they would lead to satisfaction of even the protesters' minimum demands for the removal of the prime minister, new elections and constitutional reform.

The turning point came when the youth groups that had been leading the protests called for a march on the royal palace in Al-Rifah, outside Manama, on 11 March. By most accounts, this was encouraged by three unlicensed opposition groups present in the roundabout: Al-Haq, Al-Wafaa and the Bahrain Islamic Freedom Movement (BIFM),² whose stance toward the royal family was symbolised by their 8 March announcement of a "Coalition for a Bahraini Republic". At a press conference that day, Al-Haq's leader, Hasan Mushayma, who had received a hero's welcome upon his return from London on 26 February, called for the regime's downfall through a peaceful escalation of protests and the establishment of a democratic republic.³

The announcement of this coalition shocked the alliance of seven licensed opposition groups, including Al-Wifaq, which refused to participate in the march, as they felt that the youth groups' initiative would seriously undermine their talks with the crown prince. For their part, the ruling family and large parts of the Sunni community saw the call as proof of the protesters' real intentions: to overthrow the regime and not, as Al-Wifaq and the other societies had argued, reform it.⁴ Moreover, they viewed the 11 March demonstration heading toward the king's palace as an injurious provocation and an affront they could not leave

unanswered. A royal family member close to the crown prince said:

The opposition was sitting in *la-la-land*. We told them they were misreading the situation. They were ignoring part of society [the Sunnis] as well as the regional context. And they made a miscalculation by marching toward the king's palace while he was the one providing regional cover, protecting them against the other GCC states that were urging us to crack down.⁵

In a further escalation, the youth groups decided to erect barricades outside the Bahrain Financial Harbour complex on the morning of 13 March – a Sunday, the first day of the workweek – and stop anyone from passing the main traffic thoroughfare or coming into the building, which houses banks, the social development ministry, a shopping mall and many other facilities. The Bahrain Financial Harbour, a development built on land reclaimed from the Gulf in the past decade and a major economic hub,⁶ is only a few minutes' walk from the Pearl roundabout and was seen as a convenient venue for expanding mass action. Moreover, the Financial Harbour carried important symbolic value, as protesters expressed anger over an unconfirmed story that Prime Minister Khalifa bin Salman al-Khalifa, the king's uncle, had bought the land on which its twin towers stand for just one Bahraini dinar (\$2.65). Protesters denounced the prime minister, waving one-dinar notes and telling the story to foreign media.⁷

The protesters closed off other major arteries as well. As a result, many white-collar workers were stranded in their cars on their way to work, including at the council of ministers and the foreign ministry. A government official said, "during the protests' final phase, things turned violent and led to a state of anarchy. People were truly afraid. This was a tipping point".⁸

Security forces deployed to clear the area clashed with protesters.⁹ Since allowing demonstrators back into the Pearl roundabout in February, the regime had tolerated many unannounced protests,¹⁰ but this action was a red line.

⁵ Crisis Group interview, Manama, 5 May 2011.

⁶ The Bahrain Financial Harbour's website is www.bfharbour.com.

⁷ Al Jazeera, 7 March 2011, <http://blogs.aljazeera.net/middle-east/2011/03/07/protesters-dig-bahraini-financial-hub>. In the aftermath of the crackdown, the government went out of its way to restore the prime minister's reputation and even to glorify him. His portrait appeared in shop windows, on buttons worn by non-native restaurant waiters who could not even read the Arabic words written underneath, and elsewhere. Crisis Group observations, Manama, May 2011.

⁸ Crisis Group interview, Manama, 3 May 2011.

⁹ Reuters, 13 March 2011.

¹⁰ According to Bahraini law, protest organisers need do no more than notify the relevant police station in advance of their

² For a description of these three Shiite Islamist groups, see *ibid*, pp. 18-19.

³ Agence France-Presse, 8 March 2011.

⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Bahrain, May 2011.

Sunnis, government officials, as well as expatriate workers and diplomatic staff relate, they were frightened that Sunday that total anarchy would spread across the island with risk to their personal safety. In predominantly Sunni areas such as Muharraq, local vigilante groups formed and armed themselves, mainly with batons and swords but, according to some, also with guns concealed under their *thobes* (the ankle-length garment worn by men in the Gulf), in order to defend neighbourhoods.¹¹ In predominantly Shiite areas, local youths erected checkpoints, preventing security forces from entering. For their part, some protesters claim that undercover police and spies joined the most provocative acts, such as the march to the king's palace and the blocking of the Financial Harbour area, to cause trouble and provoke the security forces into action, as well as to document the protests and identify participants.¹²

In the aftermath, the regime used the protesters' tactics of venturing out from the Pearl roundabout to strategic points in the city as evidence of links to Lebanon's Hizbollah. It alleges that some Bahraini Shiites received civil disobedience in addition to military training in Hizbollah camps in Lebanon and that the tactics resembled those employed by the Lebanese movement in Beirut in May 2008, when it brought public life to a standstill.¹³ They likewise claim

intention to hold a demonstration; this is done so that police can prepare to redirect traffic and maintain order. Since mid-February, many protests, particularly those directed at ministries, foreign embassies and other symbolic targets in Manama, were not reported to the police, yet they largely were tolerated. Indeed, police authorities say they had grown accustomed to protests. A senior security official reported he had counted as many as "1,000 protests in 2010 alone, or 3.4 per day. We are not new to it and we got used to it". Crisis Group interview, Tareq Muhammad bin Deinah, chief of public security and acting deputy interior minister, Manama, 5 May 2011.

¹¹ Crisis Group interviews, Bahrain, May 2011.

¹² Crisis Group interviews, persons who participated in the protests, Bahrain, May 2011.

¹³ Crisis Group interview, government official, Manama, 3 May 2011. For an analysis of the events in Lebanon in May 2008, see Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°23, *Lebanon: Hizbollah's Weapons Turned Inward*, 15 May 2008. Bahrain's chief military commander claimed: "The stands and statements of the Iranian officials, the remarks of the secretary general of the Lebanese Hizbollah, the meddling in Bahrain's affairs by their satellite channels, the instigation to sedition, the rumour mongering and lies, the incidents that took place in the Pearl Square, the modus operandi, the experience and tactics followed in Bahrain, the erection of tents and checkpoints, the occupation of hospitals, the encirclement of the television station building and government departments and vital installations, the way the citizens were assaulted, the distribution of roles of various cells – the field action cell, the funding cell, the media cell, and the human rights cell – expose the training techniques of Hizbollah". Staff Field Marshal Khalifa bin Ahmad Al Khalifa, the Bahrain Defence Force

that the protesters called for "an Islamic republic" rather than "a democratic republic".¹⁴ The regime has offered no corroboration, however, and tellingly protesters in Tunis and particularly Cairo had used some of the same tactics just weeks before.¹⁵

B. CRACKDOWN

1. Military intervention

As opposition activists see it, once GCC troops rolled in on 14 March and the king announced a state of emergency a day later, the prime minister unleashed a personal vendetta against both them and his internal rivals. What happened, they say, was a pre-emptive palace coup in which the de facto ruler reasserted his primacy over the ascendant crown prince, who was seen to be making concessions to the island's Shiite majority so far-reaching as to potentially spell the end of Al Khalifa rule and Sunni dominance. The prime minister, his opponents allege, called on his long-time friends in Saudi Arabia, including Prince Nayef bin Abdul-Aziz Al Saud,¹⁶ who were deeply alarmed by developments in Egypt and Tunisia – and especially by U.S. acquiescence in President Mubarak's ouster – and who view Bahrain as the Peninsula's soft underbelly, vulnerable to Iranian penetration through its Shiite population.

According to this view, the Saudis were eager to comply, or may even have given the original impetus for the intervention.¹⁷ Two other members of the ruling family's "old guard" said to have reasserted their control along with the prime minister are Khalifa bin Ahmad Al Khalifa, commander-in-chief of the Bahrain Defence Force, and his brother, Royal Court Minister Khalid bin Ahmad Al Khalifa.¹⁸ Khalifa bin Ahmad has been highly visible in both Bahraini and regional media, almost daily, reflecting

commander-in-chief, quoted in *Asharq Alawsat*, 1 June 2011, as translated and published by Mideastwire.com, 3 June 2011.

¹⁴ Crisis Group interviews, government officials, Manama, May 2011. A person close to the talks between the crown prince and the opposition claimed that Al-Haq called for "an Islamic republic" at first but then removed the word "Islamic" from its slogans. Crisis Group interview, Manama, May 2011. This claim also remains uncorroborated.

¹⁵ The same could be said about demonstrations during past G-8 meetings.

¹⁶ Prince Nayef is Saudi Arabia's interior minister and second in the line of royal succession.

¹⁷ Crisis Group interviews, opposition activists, Manama, May 2011.

¹⁸ For a congratulatory telegram on restoring "safety" from the latter to the former, see www.bna.bh/portal/en/news/439172?date=2011-04-11. Royal Court Minister Khalid bin Ahmed bin Salman Al Khalifa is not to be confused with the foreign minister, Khalid bin Ahmed bin Muhammad Al Khalifa.

the Bahrain Defence Force's increased role in imposing order from the start of the crackdown.¹⁹

Saudi Arabia likely did not need much of a push. It has long viewed Bahrain's reform project with a critical eye, particularly insofar as it involved any hint of Shiite political empowerment, which Riyadh considers a dual threat: as possible encouragement for its own Shiite minority in the Eastern Province and as a weapon in the hands of its Iranian rival. Indeed, since the 1979 Islamic revolution, political claims by Shiites in any Arab country – Iraq, Bahrain, Kuwait, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia itself – have tended to be viewed by their Sunni rulers as inspired, if not instigated, by Iran in a bid to expand its influence and establish *wilayat al-faqih*, the rule of a Shiite cleric. Coming at a time of growing concern about protest movements throughout the Middle East and North Africa, the GCC's muscular reaction in Bahrain exemplified Saudi Arabia's and its partners' determination to prevent the movements' spread on the Arabian Peninsula – or, in Bahrain's case, just off it.²⁰

Riyadh's stance was pivotal inasmuch as the bulk of the Bahraini economy is dependent on Saudi Arabia. Most of Bahrain's oil production is derived from the shared Abu Safa offshore field, from which Riyadh grants 50 per cent of revenues to Manama. Bahrain's refineries are supplied with Saudi crude oil at discounted prices. In addition, the tourism and banking sectors largely depend on Saudi visitors and deposits.²¹ A sixteen-mile causeway links Bahrain to the Saudi mainland, allowing mutual trade and travel, with thousands of Saudis flocking daily to Bahrain's more liberal and cosmopolitan culture, especially on weekends.

2. A campaign of retribution

Before the crackdown, Bahraini security forces were accused of using excessive force, beating, torturing and in

some cases killing peaceful demonstrators.²² Following the GCC troops' arrival, these security forces came down on protesters and opposition leaders even harder and, in one official's words, "cleaned up" the Pearl roundabout.²³ On 15 March, the king declared a state of emergency and promulgated a "Law of National Safety" giving security forces extensive powers to suppress the revolt, including resort to trials in special security courts. Human Rights Watch termed the crackdown "an unrelenting official campaign of punitive retribution against Bahrainis who participated in or otherwise supported the protests".²⁴

Given the scale of arrests and other punitive measures, there is little doubt these actions primarily targeted Shiite areas and activists, though some Sunni liberals also suffered.²⁵ The exact number of arrests is unknown, but in March the government acknowledged holding at least 700, some 500 of whom were released over two months;²⁶ others have been arrested since. Among those detained were between 40 and 50 medical professionals, most employed at Salmaniya Medical Complex, which had become a principal protest venue due to the frequent arrival of victims of violence and the emotions this stirred. Those detained were held incommunicado for extended periods – sometimes allowed one call to families – and there have been credible allegations of torture.²⁷ The regime gave out four death sentences for alleged roles in the deaths of two police officers following a closed special security court trial.²⁸ In

²² For an overview of such practices, see "Do No Harm: A Call for Bahrain to End Systematic Attacks on Doctors and Patients", Physicians for Human Rights, April 2011, pp. 3-4.

²³ Crisis Group interview, Manama, May 2011.

²⁴ "Testimony of Joe Stork before the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission", Human Rights Watch, 13 May 2011.

²⁵ For an account of the security sweeps, see "Bahrain: State of Fear Prevails with Arbitrary Detentions, Pre-Dawn Raids", Human Rights Watch, 7 April 2011. One of the most prominent detained Sunnis is Ibrahim Sharif, leader of the secular leftist Wa'ad political society. See Crisis Group Report N°105, *The Bahrain Revolt*, op. cit., pp. 16-17.

²⁶ Crisis Group interviews, government officials, Manama, May 2011. The government arrested more in subsequent weeks. Human Rights Watch reported in July 2011 that "some of the more than a thousand people arrested have been released. But hundreds of others remain in incommunicado detention". "Bahrain's human rights crisis", 5 July, 2011, p. 1.

²⁷ See, for example, allegations by medical personnel brought to court in Manama on 6 June. Patrick Cockburn, "Horror stories of torture in Bahrain", *The Independent*, 7 June 2011. See also, "Bahrain's human rights crisis", Human Rights Watch, op. cit., p. 4. For deaths in detention as evidence of torture, see below.

²⁸ Sentences were handed down on 28 April. The charge was premeditated murder. Three other defendants were sentenced to life in prison. See, "Bahrain: Set Aside Martial Law Death Sentences", Human Rights Watch, 2 May 2011. On 22 May, an appeals court upheld two of the death sentences, commuting the other two to life imprisonment.

¹⁹ For example, he gave a long interview to a Kuwaiti newspaper in which he described the protesters as "traitors" and accused them of trying to establish an Islamic Republic in Bahrain with the help of certain Kuwaitis. *Al-Rai*, 2 May 2011.

²⁰ Shiite politicians have vigorously rejected claims they favour the introduction of *wilayat al-faqih* in Bahrain. A senior Al-Wifaq leader said, "we don't want Iran here. We don't want *wilayat al-faqih*. Like in Iraq, it won't work here. Iraq and Bahrain are plural societies. We can only succeed via civil society. I say this as a cleric. Any religious regime will fail". Crisis Group interview, Manama, 6 May 2011. Another Al-Wifaq official said, "Al-Wifaq wants a democratic state, not a religious one. [Senior Shiite cleric] Sheikh Isa Qasem mentioned this, and explicitly rejected *wilayat al-faqih*. This is because 30 per cent of the population is Sunni". Crisis Group interview, Manama, 2 May 2011.

²¹ Crisis Group interview, business analyst, Manama, May 2011.

an egregious development, the authorities have damaged or destroyed over 40 Shiite mosques/prayer houses (*huseiniya*) and meeting places (*mat'am*), claiming they were built without license, and have threatened further demolitions on the same grounds.²⁹

What happened at Salmaniya before and after the crackdown is hotly contested. Government officials claim that protesters occupied the hospital, "politicising it", and that they had a "sophisticated communications device" inside it with which they corresponded with foreign media such as Iran's Al-Alam and Hizbollah's Al-Manar, as well as CNN.³⁰ More seriously, they accuse doctors and other medical personnel of storing weapons, blocking Sunnis from receiving treatment and worsening injuries sustained by expatriates caught up in violence and suspected of being pro-regime *baltajiya* (thugs).³¹ The government put imprisoned medical staff on trial for alleged crimes, including for trying to overthrow the monarchy.³²

Opposition activists, as well as human rights organisations, tell a different story. They describe horrific scenes inside the hospital, as those killed or wounded in the protests arrived, and security forces, which had blocked the entrances with tanks, repeatedly used tear gas and rubber bullets against people gathered outside and, according to some accounts, the hospital.³³ Following the start of the crackdown, security forces took over the hospital, controlling its entrances and grounds and arresting doctors and nurses; in early May, Crisis Group observed that the hospital entrance was still guarded by tanks and armed security forces in balaclavas. Human Rights Watch accused Bahraini authorities of "systematically targeting demonstrators and bystanders wounded in anti-government protests for harassment and mistreatment, and in some cases denying them critical care".³⁴ It also dismissed the government's accusations regarding the medical personnel on trial.³⁵ Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) explicitly condemned the post-crackdown attacks on medical personnel, terming it "one of the most extreme violations of medical neutrality in the past half century".³⁶

²⁹ Roy Gutman, "Bahrain's official tally shows cost to Shiites of mosque crackdown", *McClatchy Newspapers*, 30 May 2011; and Crisis Group observations, Bahrain, May 2011.

³⁰ Crisis Group interview, government official, Manama, May 2011. Al-Alam is an Iranian Arabic-language television channel. Al-Manar is Hizbollah's television channel. The chief of public security alleged: "The hospital was hijacked, and it became a headquarters for the protesters and a base for propaganda". Crisis Group interview, Tareq Muhammad bin Deinah, chief of public security and acting deputy interior minister, Manama, 5 May 2011.

³¹ According to public security officials, one case allegedly involves a police officer kidnapped during an altercation between protesters and Asian shopkeepers in the Mukharga neighbourhood of Manama. The chief of public security claimed: "He was taken to the Pearl roundabout, tortured there and then moved to Salmaniya hospital, which had been hijacked by the protesters. People there were kicking him and spitting at him, calling him a *baltaji* [thug]. A doctor and a nurse were doing this". He added: "Sunnis were called *baltajis*, even people who came in for regular treatment". Crisis Group interview, Tareq Muhammad bin Deinah, Manama, 5 May 2011. It is on such charges that health professionals were put on trial. However, the absence of basic due process protections means the government will not be able to substantiate these claims credibly.

³² On 3 May 2011, the military public prosecutor charged 48 doctors and other medical professionals with "refusal to extend assistance to a person in need, embezzlement of public funds, assault that resulted in death, unauthorised possession of weapons and ammunition, refusal to perform duties and putting people's lives and health at risk, illegal detention, abuse of authority to suspend and stall laws and regulations, attempt to occupy buildings by force, incitement to the forceful overthrow of a political regime, incitement to the hatred of a regime, incitement to the hatred of a segment of society, dissemination of false news and malicious rumours that could harm public interest and participation in unauthorised rallies and meetings". "Justice and Health Ministers Reveal Doctors' Crimes During Recent Unrest", Bahrain

News Agency, 3 May 2011. See "Trial resumes for Bahraini doctors accused of aiding protesters", CNN Online, 21 June 2011.

³³ Crisis Group interviews, opposition activists, Bahrain, May 2011. For an independent account, see "Do No Harm", op. cit. See also a statement by Médecins sans Frontières, "From hospital to prison – medical aid in Bahrain", 13 May 2011.

³⁴ "Wounded Protesters Beaten, Detained", Human Rights Watch, 30 March 2011.

³⁵ On the role of medical personnel during the month of protests, Human Rights Watch concluded that while "anti-government protesters, including some doctors and medical staff may have played a role in compromising the principle of medical neutrality and access to health care by turning the grounds of Salmaniya Medical Complex, the country's largest public hospital, into a protest rally site February 14 and March 16", "... the politicised and sometimes chaotic atmosphere in and around [Salmaniya] was particularly notable after clashes between security forces and protesters on February 17/18, March 11 and March 13"; "during visits to [Salmaniya] between February 17 and March 16, Human Rights Watch saw no evidence of weapons of any sort in the hospital prior to the military takeover"; and "Human Rights Watch found no evidence or indication that medical staff or these volunteers were involved in hoarding weapons or discriminating against patients based on sectarian affiliation". "Targets of Retribution: Attacks against Medics, Injured Protesters, and Health Facilities", 18 July 2011, pp. 46, 48. Separately, and perhaps most damningly, Human Rights Watch asserted that "none of these allegations surfaced before the government took over the hospital in mid-March, despite the fact that the government had effectively remained in charge of Salmaniya and other health centres throughout the protest period". "Bahrain's human rights crisis", op. cit., p. 7.

³⁶ "Do No Harm", op. cit., pp. 3-4. A PHR official said that due to an editing error, the published text read: "Bahrain's abuses in the spring of 2011 are the most extreme violations of medical neutrality in the past half century", instead of "one of the most". She

Following mass arrests under emergency law, four persons died in detention. Among them was Karim Fakhrawi, a board member of *Al-Wasat* newspaper and the owner of both a publishing house and a prominent bookstore chain.³⁷ Shiite opposition activists claim he was targeted because he was an Ajam, a Shiite of Iranian origin. The Ajam, who represent around 10 per cent of Bahraini Shiites, have felt deeply threatened as a community; its leaders have kept a low profile since the crackdown began.³⁸ PHR claimed that his death, even if due to kidney failure as alleged by authorities, could have been averted and was therefore unacceptable.³⁹ It concluded that a second death in detention appeared to be the result of blunt-force injuries, and the two others of negligent medical care.⁴⁰

The arrests targeted chiefly protest leaders, but, according to many accounts, ordinary people who attended events at the Pearl roundabout also were liable to be detained.⁴¹ Moreover, two Al-Wifaq legislators who had resigned from parliament along with sixteen colleagues in February were arrested in early May, one at gunpoint by a group of masked men. As a senior Al-Wifaq cadre put it, "if even deputies of Al-Wifaq, which is the strongest political party in Bahrain and with whom the crown prince was negotiating, are targeted, just imagine how ordinary Shiites are being treated".⁴² On 22 June, a Lower National Safety Court consisting of one presiding military judge and two

justified the organisation's assessment by stating: "Rarely has PHR documented this number of health professionals rounded up, 'disappeared', apparently tortured, etc., while in the line of duty, with such intimidation and literal militarisation of a national major medical centre, and now these trials". Crisis Group e-mail communication, 8 June 2011.

³⁷ For detail on his case, see a Committee to Protect Journalists media statement, 15 April 2011, www.cpj.org/2011/04/al-wasat-founder-dies-in-custody-in-bahrain.php.

³⁸ Al-Ikhaa, the political society representing the Ajam that was part of the seven-societies alliance, disappeared from the public scene for some time after mid-March but participated in the regime-sponsored "National Dialogue" in July.

³⁹ The report concluded: "Karim Fakhrawi died in custody with extensive soft tissue injury. An autopsy was not performed and therefore internal injuries cannot be evaluated, especially renal trauma or closed head injury, which may be the direct cause of death. Even in the absence of an autopsy, the extent and severity of soft tissue injury would have resulted in severe myoglobinuria with renal shutdown and death. With advanced medical services available in the Kingdom of Bahrain, death in custody from renal failure resulting from severe blunt force trauma is unacceptable". "Do No Harm", pp. 24-25.

⁴⁰ The authorities attributed the two deaths to sickle cell anaemia. Physicians for Human Rights concluded: "Failure to render medical care constitutes extreme negligence and wanton disregard for human life". Ibid, pp. 25-26.

⁴¹ "Bahrain: Arbitrary Arrests Escalate", Human Rights Watch, 4 May 2011.

⁴² Crisis Group interview, Manama, May 2011.

civilian judges sentenced 21 opposition leaders, political activists and human rights defenders (seven in absentia) to lengthy jail terms, including eight to life imprisonment.⁴³

3. A media war

From the onset of the protests, the kingdom witnessed a media war. The regime used Bahrain TV and all major newspapers, except *Al-Wasat*, to convey its version of events. At the same time, Hizbollah's Al-Manar TV and the Iranian Al-Alam Arabic news channel, as well as Iraqi Shiite channels put the spotlight on Bahrain.⁴⁴ Al Jazeera Arabic, whose coverage in Egypt and Tunisia had been extremely important in disseminating information, devoted comparatively less time to events in Bahrain, a conspicuous lapse that has been interpreted as resulting from official Qatari restrictions.⁴⁵ Some Western news channels, including BBC in Arabic, covered events, but by and large protesters who wanted to stay informed or have their voices heard had to turn to Shiite satellite channels.

This reality was exploited by the regime. By speaking on an Iranian or Hizbollah television channel on an almost daily basis, protest leaders and activists became easy targets for criticism and retribution. Government officials and activists in the National Unity Gathering, a collection of predominantly Sunni Islamist groups and independents that arose in response to a perceived threat from Shiite-dominated protests (see below), have offered the opposition's appearance on Shiite news channels as Exhibit A in their allegation of "Iranian meddling". They argue that Sunnis in Bahrain and indeed throughout the region felt deeply threatened by what they perceived as a pro-Iranian/Hizbollah political onslaught via Bahraini Shiites' seizure of the Pearl roundabout.⁴⁶

⁴³ Roy Gutman, "Bahraini military court imposes harsh sentences on dissenters", *McClatchy Newspapers*, 22 June 2011. See "Court adjourns trial of terror plot suspects", *Gulf Daily News* (Bahrain).

⁴⁴ In particular, the Iraq-based Ahl al-Beit television station has focused on Bahrain, broadcasting Hadi al-Mudarrisi's speeches calling for the regime's downfall and criticising Saudi Arabia. See www.ahlulbayt.org. Al-Mudarrisi was the head of the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain (IFLB, Al-Jabhat al-Islamiya li Tahrir al-Bahrain), the Bahraini branch of a Shiite Islamist political trend called the Shirazis. See Crisis Group Report, *The Bahrain Revolt*, op. cit., pp. 15-16.

⁴⁵ Crisis Group assessment based on following Al Jazeera Arabic's coverage of Bahrain and other countries in the region, January-March 2011. See Toby C. Jones, "Bahrain, Kingdom of Silence", 4 May 2011, www.carnegieendowment.org/arb/?fa=show&article=43832. Al Jazeera officials have denied that the channel devoted comparatively less time to events in Bahrain or that Qatari policy had influenced its editorial policy. See Thomas Erdbrink, "Al-Jazeera TV network draws criticism, praise for coverage of Arab revolutions", *The Washington Post*, 15 May 2011.

⁴⁶ Crisis Group interviews, National Unity Gathering activists, Manama, May 2011.

While Sunni fear of Shiite domination in Bahrain's highly charged sectarian environment might be understandable, there was little justification for using this as grounds for arrest and prosecution of Bahrainis who provided their views on events as they unfolded.

After the crackdown, the government used Bahrain TV, drawing on footage from the protests in February-March, to accuse individual participants of sedition as part of an alleged Iranian coup plot. As an opposition activist put it sarcastically in May, "all you have to do is watch Bahrain TV. If your name is mentioned, you know you will be arrested. If not, you tune in again the next day".⁴⁷

The independent *Al-Wasat* was until early April one of the most outspoken and independent newspapers in the Arab world. No other Gulf newspaper could afford to be so critical of its own government. Founded in 2002 and edited by Mansour al-Jamri, a former opposition activist in London and son of a prominent Shiite religious leader, it was part and parcel of the king's post-2001 reform project, which included a general amnesty, dissolution of State Security Courts, abrogation of the State Security Law and the promulgation of a National Action Charter.⁴⁸ Throughout the protests in 2011 and for some time after the crackdown, it provided intensive coverage of events, including deaths and detentions, while in his editorials al-Jamri called for dialogue between government and opposition.

On 15 March, as the crackdown got underway, the offices of *Al-Wasat* were attacked by unknown assailants. Two weeks later, on 2 April, Bahrain TV aired a program alleging that the newspaper had published a series of fake stories. This compelled al-Jamri to acknowledge that the charges were true, and as a result he and other editorial staff were forced to resign. They claimed, however, that they had been set up – that the stories had been sent to them from a single IP address in Saudi Arabia, and that they had been unable to verify them before they decided to run them, as they had been unable to use their offices following the attack on the building.⁴⁹ Al-Jamri and three other journalists subsequently were charged and put on trial for fabricating news with the "intention of causing instability in Bahrain".⁵⁰

While *Al-Wasat's* board initially announced the newspaper's closure, pressure from the authorities has kept it operating under new editorial control, but it no longer carries criti-

cal stories or views and thus looks a lot more like other Bahraini newspapers.⁵¹ The government's action sent a strong message to dissenting voices that they should keep quiet and served as evidence that the regime has won the media war. Even so, there are limits to its victory. Although oppositional websites have been blocked, technically savvy youth have found ways around this, and Shiite satellite television channels are still being watched, mainly in Shiite homes, while most Sunnis watch Bahrain TV, in addition to foreign channels. This suggests a de facto sectarian segregation in media consumption – a troubling development, especially in light of the credibility at least some Bahraini media outlets had acquired over the past decade.

4. Job dismissals and loyalty oaths

Another government action that has stirred major concern because of its potentially devastating long-term consequences has been the dismissal of hundreds of protesters from their jobs; many subsequently also were stripped of their unemployment insurance.⁵² Despite the king's and crown prince's public assurances in February that the government would tolerate peaceful protests, participants discovered that their presence in the Pearl roundabout or their appearance on a foreign satellite channel became cause for dismissal from their jobs at the hands of workplace committees that compiled lists of employees, mostly Shiites, who were questioned about their earlier whereabouts. A trade union representative, for example, stated that one of the reasons given for his and his colleagues' dismissal was their failure to arrive at the workplace during the protests. He also mentioned cases in which people lost their jobs because they did not show up at work during the tensest week in mid-March, when much of the country came to a standstill.⁵³

Moreover, throughout government institutions, state-controlled companies and large private companies, staff were asked to sign so-called loyalty oaths, in which they declared their continued allegiance to king and country;⁵⁴ those who refused faced dismissal, ostracism and in some cases arrest. Many private or semi-private companies also began sponsoring billboards along major arteries or large newspaper advertisements in which they praised the rul-

⁴⁷ Crisis Group interview, Manama, May 2011.

⁴⁸ See Crisis Group Report, *The Bahrain Revolt*, op. cit., p. 3.

⁴⁹ See the PBS "Newshour" interview with Al-Jamri, 20 May 2011, www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/world/jan-june11/bahrain_05-20.html.

⁵⁰ See Reuters, 18 May 2011. In early July, the trial – before a civilian court – was postponed until October 2011.

⁵¹ Crisis Group interview, diplomat, Bahrain, May 2011. See www.alwasatnews.com and Mansur Muhammad Sarhan, *al-sahafa fi al-Bahrain* (Manama, 2006), pp. 72-89. See also, "Bahrain: Drop Charges Against Editor of Independent Daily", Human Rights Watch, 11 April 2011.

⁵² Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Manama, May 2011. U.S. officials said they estimated some 1,850 Bahrainis had lost their jobs as result of having their loyalty questioned. State Department briefing, Washington DC, June 2011.

⁵³ Crisis Group interview, trade unionist, Bahrain, May 2011.

⁵⁴ The campaign extended to universities as well.

ing family for its wisdom and pledged their allegiance. The loyalty oaths extended to students at Bahrain University, some of whom claim they were forced to sign a pledge of allegiance to the government or face expulsion.⁵⁵ These actions were not limited to Bahrain. For example, Bahrainis studying on government scholarships in the UK and who participated in protests there found their scholarships revoked and their family members back home harassed by the authorities. Many of these students have sought asylum in the UK and elsewhere, fearing persecution and maltreatment if they returned.⁵⁶

The National Unity Gathering, in particular, championed the loyalty pledge campaign, putting up huge billboards around Manama and Muharraq. It likewise initiated a nationwide drive to gain signatures for a statement denouncing “foreign interference in Bahrain”—a barely veiled allusion to Iran – and, to show its endorsement, provided copies of the statement and pens at the entrances of its affiliated charitable and political organisations.⁵⁷

5. Emergence of a Sunni narrative

The National Unity Gathering's emergence as a pan-Sunni bloc and staunch ally of the ruling family is one of the crackdown's most important political outcomes. As virtually the only political force that was not attacked by the regime, it came out as the biggest winner and therefore is likely to dominate the political scene for some time. Although some of its leaders continue to refer to themselves as opposition activists, because they do not hold formal government positions and call for economic and social reforms, they in fact declare strong loyalty to the Al Khalifas.⁵⁸

Open to all citizens, Shiites included, the National Unity Gathering nonetheless is dominated by Sunni Islamist groups and, as such, should be seen as a champion of the Sunnis. It comprises three Islamist groups – the Muslim Brotherhood (al-Minbar al-Watani al-Islami), the Salafi trend (al-Asala al-Islamiya⁵⁹) and Jami'iyat al-Shura al-Islamiya, which, unlike the other two, is not yet represented in parliament – as well as other Sunni groups that felt threatened by Shiite-led demonstrations (including former leftists who fell out with the secular Wa'ad, a political society that participated in the demonstrations). It also includes some secular Sunni leftists who consider the Gathering a

bulwark against Shiite Islamists and a defender of Bahrain's “Arabness”.⁶⁰

Founded on 20 February 2011, the National Unity Gathering soon staged large counter-demonstrations in the square in front of Al-Fateh Mosque in the centre of Manama. Its constituent groups strengthened their hold over parliament after Al-Wifaq's eighteen deputies resigned on 27 February; since the crackdown, it has been present on a daily basis in virtually all of Bahrain's media except *Al-Wasat*. Its backbone and one of the main sources of its strength is the charitable sector, with its many branches and network of supporters. This is particularly true of the third Sunni Islamist group, Jami'iyat al-Shura al-Islamiya, which possesses a powerful charitable branch, the Islamic Society (Jami'iyat al-Islamiya); the latter's former head, the Sunni cleric Sheikh Abd-al-Latif Mahmoud, became the Gathering's leader. He explained his group's origins:

We put together the Gathering because after 14 February the Shiites began to threaten the Sunnis and treat them like enemies. This was very surprising, because we have always lived together. On 18 February there was talk of starting a dialogue with the protesters, but only the Shiites were represented, and then only the most extremist among them. We said publicly: “there are three sides – regime, Shiites and Sunnis. We also want to participate – as an independent side with equal weight”

Before 14 February we had no problems with Al-Wifaq in parliament. We had no differences of principle. What happened after the 14th was different: it was about the existence of the state. There was Twitter traffic that after the Shiites finished the job in Iraq [electing a Shiite Islamist-led government], they were coming to Bahrain. The licensed and unlicensed societies, as well as the Majlis al-Islami al-Ulamae [Islamic Council of the Ulama, an unofficial group of leading Shiite clerics in Bahrain], were talking about dialogue, but that's not what they wanted; they were closely coordinating the fall of the regime. The Shiites use *taqiya* [dissimulation]: they don't tell you what they think.⁶¹

Through its networks, as well as through the media, the National Unity Gathering appears to have mobilised a majority of Sunnis, capitalising on their fear, which it has actively fuelled. At the local level, in the Sunni towns and neighbourhoods, branches of the Gathering's three main Sunni Islamist trends have been extremely active, generating

⁵⁵ See *The Los Angeles Times* blog, 18 May 2011, <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com>.

⁵⁶ *The Muslim News*, 29 April 2011, www.muslimnews.co.uk.

⁵⁷ Crisis Group interview, National Unity Gathering leaders, Manama, May 2011.

⁵⁸ Crisis Group interview, National Unity Gathering member, Manama, 7 May 2011.

⁵⁹ See Crisis Group Report, *The Bahrain Revolt*, op. cit., pp. 12-13.

⁶⁰ Secular leftists are organised in the Arab Islamic Centre (Al-Wasat al-Arabi al-Islami) and the National Justice Movement (Harakat al-Adala al-Wataniya), founded by Sunni lawyer Abdullah Hashem. Crisis Group interviews, representatives from both societies, Manama, May 2011.

⁶¹ Crisis Group interview, Cairo, 9 May 2011.

support for the ruling family and opposition to the “Shiite threat”.⁶²

Although some of its affiliated groups, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, seem to be less sectarian, others speak out openly against Shiites and their religious beliefs, equating Shiite empowerment with an Iranian takeover.⁶³ In a sign of growing rhetorical escalation, the Gathering went so far as to issue statements backing Arabs in the Iranian province of Khuzestan in their struggle against “the Iranian occupation”.⁶⁴

III. THE FAILURE OF SECRET DELIBERATIONS

During the heady month of demonstrations in February-March, much play was given to the regime's inability to start a public dialogue with the opposition. This was not for lack of discussions. Talks between one faction in the ruling family, headed by the crown prince, and the Shiite Islamist group Al-Wifaq, the largest opposition society,⁶⁵ were intensive and ongoing, aimed at identifying the conditions for launching a formal and public dialogue, akin to a negotiation on reform. Consultations between the two sides began before protests broke out on 14 February and gained pace days into the revolt. An analysis of these consultations, the players involved and their respective positions is the key to understanding why these talks ultimately failed and to assessing how they might form the basis for both the “National Dialogue” launched on 5 July 2011 and any future negotiations on reform.

Two days before the start of the Pearl roundabout protests, Al-Wifaq's leader, Sheikh Ali Salman, met with King Hamad. The ruling family was concerned over calls made on Facebook and online forums for demonstrations on 14 February, the tenth anniversary of the king's reform project, the National Action Charter. In turn, Al-Wifaq tried to capitalise on the planned protests, seeking to convince the king he could avoid a fate for Bahrain similar to Egypt's or Tunisia's through immediate concessions – for example by announcing that future prime ministers would not be members of the royal family but elected and therefore accountable; supporting the government's resignation; and agreeing to early elections to a constituent assembly.

According to persons familiar with the conversation, the king replied it would be difficult to dismiss the prime minister, his uncle, a septuagenarian responsible for Bahrain's economic growth from the 1970s onward, who assumed his position at independence in 1971. Moreover, the king reportedly told Salman that the GCC states, which had criticised him for pursuing reform in the past, would not countenance the prime minister's removal.⁶⁶

In the event, the king made no pre-emptive reform announcement, and the demonstrations went ahead on 14 February. While Al-Wifaq did not openly call on its supporters to join, it argued it could not stop them from demonstrating

⁶² Crisis Group interview, Abd-al-Rahman Abd-al-Salam, member of Majlis al-Shura, the National Unity Gathering and the Islamic Society, Manama, May 2011.

⁶³ Crisis Group interview, National Unity Gathering leaders, Manama, May 2011.

⁶⁴ See the National Unity Gathering's website, www.tgonu.org/node/311.

⁶⁵ Al-Wifaq won eighteen seats in the 2010 parliamentary elections – all the seats won by the opposition. The remaining 22 seats went to pro-regime candidates.

⁶⁶ The king reportedly added that he had been able to defend Bahrain's reform effort against GCC pressure by citing the country's unique history, social makeup and highly educated population. Crisis Group interviews, Manama, 6 May 2011.

for a just cause.⁶⁷ Both the regime and the opposition appeared caught off guard when the protesters grew in numbers and took over the Pearl roundabout.

The time factor is critical in understanding why deliberations failed. The longer protests continued, the more hardliners gained dominance on all sides: within the ruling family, among the protesters (including the opposition societies) and in the Sunni community. Even as it appeared in mid-March that the crown prince and king were approaching a deal with Al-Wifaq and the other six opposition societies, following intense month-long talks, time had run out.

The record of events suggests that the crown prince and Al-Wifaq engaged in good-faith negotiations and came very close to agreement. However, a radicalisation of the protesters' demands (replacement of the monarchy with a republic) and of their decisions (marching on the financial district and royal palace), as well as the emergence of pro-regime protesters and armed vigilante groups, worsened the crisis. In turn, this provided regime hardliners the opportunity to reassert control within the ruling family, invite in GCC forces and forcibly impose law and order, thus ending the uprising, putting an end to the talks and dramatically setting back chances for reform. A civil society activist commented:

When the crown prince invited the seven [licensed] opposition societies and nongovernmental organisations to present their views, the youths in the Pearl roundabout, who were more radical, started to raise the slogan: "No dialogue except in the roundabout". And then: "Whoever wants dialogue, leave the roundabout". We had a gathering of 22 civil society organisations and another gathering of 200 personalities. The general mood was in favour of putting conditions for dialogue, and there was a sense that delay would yield bigger concessions by the regime. Meanwhile, the mood in the street became more and more radical and rejectionist. The radicals dominated the slogans: "Down with [King] Hamad! Down with the regime!" We tried to convince people to settle for a constitutional monarchy, but their response was: "the regime must go". The voice of moderation was lost, things escalated, and the protesters began to radiate out of the Pearl roundabout.⁶⁸

He attributed the hardening of positions in the Pearl roundabout to the security forces' night-time attack on the protesters and the appearance of armed gangs (*baltajiya*) in neighbourhoods around 11 March.⁶⁹ "The deterioration

happened with the deployment of thugs. This discouraged the negotiations. These thugs were sent by a regime faction that wanted to abort the negotiations. Any responsible opposition would have understood this and not let itself be distracted by it. These were blunders, strategic mistakes . . ."⁷⁰

During that one month of informal deliberations, the seven licensed opposition societies and the crown prince's emissaries met almost daily. The crown prince first met privately with Ali Salman on 16 February to talk about the outlines of a dialogue.⁷¹ He seemed sufficiently optimistic to give an interview to Bahrain state television two days later, in which he called for a national dialogue involving all parties, starting "right now, this evening". He stated repeatedly that this reflected his personal and spontaneous initiative after he had witnessed the bloodshed in the streets – seven protesters were killed in the uprising's first four days – and he condemned both sides for using excessive force. Asked about Al-Wifaq, he said explicitly: "I do not want to blame anyone. I respect Al-Wifaq, like I respect all others. Today is the time to sit and talk, not the time for struggle".⁷²

Shortly after his son's television appearance, the king issued a statement:

Following the genuine and honest initiative taken by His Royal Highness Prince Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa and which emanated from the heart of every loyal and sincere Bahraini citizen and which he announced on Bahrain Television this evening, and based on our trust in young people, we have assigned him to start a dialogue with all parties and sections in our beloved Bahrain and without exception.⁷³

These statements suggest that the dialogue was indeed the crown prince's own initiative and that, even though it enjoyed the king's support, it might not have been embraced or approved by other ruling family members, such as the prime minister. Yet, his public assertions appear to have been well received by Bahrainis and persuaded many protesters he was sincere and that dialogue could be a viable way forward.⁷⁴ The king sent emissaries to meet with the Shiite Majlis al-Islami al-Ulamae (Islamic Council of the Ulama), a group of leading Shiite clerics headed by Sheikh Isa Qasem.⁷⁵

⁶⁷ Crisis Group interviews, protester, Manama, May 2011; Al-Wifaq officials, Manama, May 2011.

⁶⁸ Crisis Group interview, Manama, May 2011.

⁶⁹ www.boston.com/business/articles/2011/03/13/bahrain_protests_block_road_to_finance_district/.

⁷⁰ Crisis Group interview, Manama, May 2011.

⁷¹ Crisis Group interview, Al-Wifaq cadre, Manama, May 2011.

⁷² Bahrain News Agency, 18 February 2011.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Manama, May 2011.

⁷⁵ Crisis Group interview, civil society activist present at some of the deliberations between the crown prince and the opposition, Manama, May 2011.

By the end of February, the crown prince's entourage as well as the opposition had contacted foreign mediators, both governments and private citizens. People close to the crown prince asked the U.K. and U.S. representatives in Bahrain to use their good offices to persuade the opposition to join a dialogue without preconditions. In addition to efforts by its embassy in Manama to meet with all sides and facilitate dialogue, the U.S. expended considerable diplomatic energies through the involvement of Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Jeffrey D. Feltman. He visited five times between mid-February and mid-March, shuttling between the crown prince and Al-Wifaq, attempting to broker a deal until the last minute, including on 15 March, a day after Saudi troops arrived. On that day, however, the crown prince and king became unavailable to him. His mediation efforts ended as the king declared a state of emergency. In a separate but coordinated attempt to reach a deal during a visit to Manama two days earlier, 13 March, U.S. Secretary of Defence Robert Gates had urged the king and crown prince to accelerate reform efforts.⁷⁶

Al-Wifaq asked Chibli Mallat, a Lebanese constitutional lawyer and visiting professor at Harvard University, to work out a proposal for a future constitution, an initiative reportedly encouraged by the U.S. State Department.⁷⁷ Mallat and a group of Harvard students had just suggested possible constitutional reforms in Egypt and now turned to Bahrain, drafting an essay and several background papers with proposals to amend key constitutional provisions.⁷⁸ From their side, the crown prince's negotiators contacted a conflict management consulting firm in Cambridge, Massachusetts, CMPartners.⁷⁹ It sent a team to Manama to investigate the opposing sides' positions, establish a diagnosis and develop a strategy and timeline for the parties to engage each other more effectively.⁸⁰ The crown prince brought in a former Latin American president to train his negotiators, while a delegation of South African mediators also arrived in Bahrain. None of these efforts had a chance to bear fruit as the crisis intensified.

While talks proceeded in apparent good faith, the sides followed different strategies: Al-Wifaq's express goal was to obtain democratic rights within a monarchical system, not the system's overthrow.⁸¹ It never wavered in its principal demand for the government's resignation and constituent assembly elections, followed by the drafting of a new constitution – demands that the regime interpreted as constituting a slippery slope toward its removal through the political process. Al-Wifaq believed it had no choice, however. It was motivated by deep mistrust of regime reform promises, as in the past these had produced minimal gains, far short of both those promises and its own demands. It felt it needed a guarantee that reforms would indeed be carried out, and the only guarantee it trusted – and felt entitled to – was a constituent assembly arising from new elections based on redrawn, fair boundaries. Its sense of having been betrayed in 2002, when the king failed to deliver the promised substantially new constitution, and its ensuing mistrust of the ruling family's intentions, decisively shaped its negotiating posture. An Al-Wifaq member said:

Ten years ago, the situation was very tense. Then the king sat with the opposition and opened a dialogue, a new page. He took steps we highly appreciated: he released all political prisoners, allowed exiles to return, cancelled the emergency law and staged a referendum on the National Charter. On 14 February 2001, the referendum passed with 98.4 per cent support. This generated great hope: 14 February became a day of happiness. A year later, on 14 February 2002, the king brought a new constitution without having consulted with the people. The king pulled all authority to himself. The constitution provided for a parliament with two chambers: the lower house, elected, and the upper house [Shura Council], appointed. Nevertheless, opposition groups agreed to participate in elections, because the king told us we could change things from within. In 2002, we boycotted, but we participated in 2006 and 2010.

After the developments in Tunisia and Egypt earlier this year, we spoke to the king and said, on 14 February [the day of the planned protests], fulfil your promises: no appointed Shura Council, only one elected body; an elected government; and an equal vote for every citizen. However, the king did not accept this.⁸²

⁷⁶ Caryle Murphy, "Bahrain becomes flashpoint in relations between US and Saudi Arabia", Global Post.com, 13 April 2011; and Crisis Group interviews, U.S. State Department and Pentagon officials, Washington, May 2011.

⁷⁷ Murphy, op. cit.

⁷⁸ Chibli Mallat and Jason Gelbort, "Constitutional Options for Bahrain", *Virginia Journal of International Law*, vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 1-16. For the background papers, see www.righttononviolence.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=98&Itemid=45. Mallat was supposed to fly to Manama on 13 March. At Boston's Logan Airport, however, he received a call from the State Department dissuading him from undertaking his trip because of the deteriorating situation. Murphy, op. cit.

⁷⁹ The group emerged from the Harvard Negotiation Project. See www.cmpartners.com.

⁸⁰ Crisis Group interview, observer to the talks, May 2011.

⁸¹ An Al-Wifaq official said, "we don't want to overthrow the Al Khalifas. We want democratic rights. The experience of Kuwait has shown us that you can have a ruling family with a fully elected parliament. The situation there is stable. No one is calling on the Kuwaiti royal family's departure. The Kuwait model is acceptable for us". Crisis Group interview, Manama, 2 May 2011.

⁸² Crisis Group interview, Manama, May 2011. See also, Crisis Group Report, *The Bahrain Revolt*, op. cit., p. 3. By contrast, government officials hold up the past decade as a model of steady

Al-Wifaq's posture was motivated as well by its knowledge that the Pearl roundabout protesters, including the unlicensed opposition groups, were making more far-reaching demands; it therefore feared it would lose popular support if it settled for further loose promises of reform. Moreover, a senior Al-Wifaq official said, "we explained to the crown prince we wanted a constituent assembly, because this was the only way we could convince everyone at the Pearl roundabout. When we spoke to [Al-Haq's] Hasan Mushayma, he said he would come along if we could reach agreement about a constituent assembly".⁸³ Mushayma's assent would have made a critical impact on the Pearl roundabout protesters, given his prominent role there.

The crown prince followed a different approach. He understood that the country faced an unprecedented crisis and that he had little time, because regime hardliners led by the prime minister, as well as neighbouring Gulf states, were pressing for a crackdown. Al-Wifaq's demand for a constituent assembly was a red line, because the regime saw it as potentially the beginning of the end: a constituent assembly based on fair representation would lead to Shiite domination and then, it feared, the replacement of the monarchy by a republic. The opposition's refusal to concede on this point fuelled Sunni suspicion, in particular, that its ultimate goal is ending the monarchy, installing Islamic law (Sharia) and possibly even the rule of the *wilayat al-faqih*.⁸⁴ Short of consenting to the opposition's demand, the crown prince nonetheless was able to float ideas and make significant political concessions, especially since all the two sides were seeking to agree to was the agenda for a formal dialogue.

On the day before the GCC intervention, 13 March, the crown prince, reportedly prodded and encouraged by Feltman and Gates, offered to discuss most of the opposition's demands in a public dialogue (the seven points of debate are listed further below) and place any resulting agreement before a popular referendum. Although Al-Wifaq saw this offer, especially the referendum, as far-reaching and serious, it rejected it, holding on to its demand for a significant substantive concession upfront, such as the government's resignation and elections to a constituent assembly, on the ground that anything less would fail to persuade the Pearl roundabout protesters and more radical

Islamist opposition groups, such as Al-Haq, to accept the deal.⁸⁵ An Al-Wifaq leader said:

They didn't move far enough. We believe we first had to reach agreement behind closed doors. Our argument was that if we couldn't reach an agreement in private meetings, without pressure, then how could we achieve it out in the open, in front of the public?⁸⁶

The conundrum in which Al-Wifaq found itself was that it had to press for more ambitious demands in order to keep the protesters on board and prevent them from undercutting its efforts. Yet in doing so it risked dragging out the talks, in light of the regime's red lines, and thus encouraged the protesters to escalate their tactics out of frustration and anger over a monarchy that they perceived to be tottering yet still impervious to what Shiites and many other Bahrainis see as an issue of fundamental rights. The passage of time, likewise, bolstered regime hardliners, who were waiting for their opportunity to strike back.

The crown prince faced his own set of constraints. He was willing to broaden a future dialogue agenda by including most of the licensed opposition groups' demands, but he was under severe pressure from the prime minister and his allies – his political rivals – as well as Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states to end the protests, preserve the ruling family's power and authority and, thus, resist any far-reaching concession. Both regime factions have a basic stake in the monarchy's survival, but they differ over tactics: exclusion and, when necessary, repression on the one hand versus a more communal *modus vivendi* based on broader participation coupled with strict limits on elected institutions' powers on the other.

By mid-March, when chances for a negotiated compromise began to slip away, the hardline faction gained the upper hand; tellingly, the regime presented a common front in welcoming GCC military intervention. It was the king, who earlier had empowered his son to work out a deal with the opposition, who formally invited it and declared martial law. Overall, the crown prince looks like he lost ground within the royal family, and his camp currently appears politically marginalised. This, in turn, has fuelled feelings of bitterness toward an opposition that it has accused of letting down the only people inside the royal family they could rely on to bring about reform.

Persons close to the crown prince claim that talks were derailed by the escalation in protester tactics between 11 and 13 March, and that, given additional time, an agreement could have been reached. Both critics and even some supporters of the protesters gathered in the Pearl roundabout

progress on reform, citing accomplishments: "a lot of firsts in the Gulf" – such as the rise of a vibrant civil society, women's empowerment and unemployment benefits. Yet, one such official conceded: "Despite all these accomplishments over the past ten years – we went out on a limb – Bahrain is not immune to criticism. Political reform always proved a challenge. Of course, we have also made mistakes". Crisis Group interview, Manama, May 2011.

⁸³ Crisis Group interview, Manama, 6 May 2011.

⁸⁴ Crisis Group interviews, various Sunni officials, Bahrain, May 2011.

⁸⁵ Crisis Group interview, Al-Wifaq cadre, Manama, May 2011.

⁸⁶ Crisis Group interview, Manama, May 2011.

charge that they overreached, expecting the regime to fall, as had Egypt's and Tunisia's leaders, and therefore deciding they did not need to pursue a compromise. These same critics blame the licensed opposition societies for not exerting sufficient leadership over the protesters to bring them around to more realistically achievable demands. A civil society activist close to the opposition and a participant in the talks recalled, for example:

We begged Mushayma not to stage a demonstration against the royal court in Al-Rifah and against the al-Safriya palace [in Sadad]. It was an obvious provocation. But they went ahead because they were convinced that the regime would fall. They made a miscalculation. The opposition societies should have taken a firmer stand in favour of compromise and brought people along. Instead they allowed themselves to drift into this.⁸⁷

In so doing, these critics assert, the opposition "wasted a golden opportunity to take Bahrain to a new level".⁸⁸ A pro-regime Shura Council (upper house of parliament) member noted that the crown prince had convinced the ruling family to agree to the seven points to be discussed as part of reform efforts, but that "the opposition slapped him down".⁸⁹

A person close to the crown prince who was involved in the talks noted bitterly that the opposition groups were peaceful but not pragmatic. He and others faulted Al-Wifaq for setting their principal negotiating demands as preconditions for starting a formal dialogue.⁹⁰ He said the opposition groups and protesters had made a series of additional tactical errors and miscalculations that, cumulatively, caused the talks to fail as the crisis spun out of control. By choosing to see things through an "us-oppressed-Shiites-versus-the-regime" prism, he argued, the opposition discounted a significant part of the population, the Sunnis, causing anxiety, anger and a furious reaction on the latter's part.

Moreover, he continued, the opposition failed to fully appreciate the regional context, especially the Saudi fear of Iranian meddling. It launched a march on the royal palace even though the king had given cover for dialogue and had held off Saudi Arabia. It misinterpreted government restraint during the month of protests as weakness. At times it believed its own false information, for example a report that the prime minister was on his way to the airport and exile. Finally, he said, Al-Wifaq in particular allowed itself to be led by the street, rather than exercising leadership

by dropping its preconditions, agreeing to dialogue and working incrementally to institute reforms.⁹¹

The basis for some of these criticisms is difficult to verify (for example, did the king indeed hold off the Saudi troops?), and it seems unfair to conflate the behaviour of Al-Wifaq and the other six licensed opposition societies with that of the unlicensed groups and unaffiliated youth gathered at the Pearl roundabout.⁹² The licensed societies, for example, consistently pressed for cross-communal peace and opposed the march on the royal palace, which was likely to inflame sectarian passions because of the palace's location in Sunni Al-Rifah. Al-Wifaq also has been quite aware of the regional context and the limits it imposes on Bahraini politics; indeed, this constituted a principal reason why it agreed all along to work within the political system. Likewise, Al-Wifaq made clear it agrees that the Sunni opposition should be included as a full partner in a national dialogue; it sat down with National Unity Gathering representatives several times before the crackdown, including for a lengthy meeting on 13 March.⁹³

Even so, an Al-Wifaq official explicitly acknowledged that it should have played more of a leadership role: "One of our mistakes might have been that we were too soft with the masses. We should have led them. [Al-Wifaq leader] Ali Salman pushed very hard to get the roads opened [on 13 March] and confine the protests to the Pearl roundabout, but the youths were divided, and he failed".⁹⁴

The GCC intervention and ensuing crackdown by Bahraini security forces fundamentally altered the playing field. Whatever trust that existed between pro-dialogue forces has been shattered; the political atmosphere has been poisoned profoundly by sectarian invective; the opposition has been weakened by repression and fear; the regime feels emboldened by GCC military and financial support, as well as by the U.S.'s relative silence (see below); and a

⁸⁷ Crisis Group interview, Manama, May 2011.

⁸⁸ Crisis Group interview, government official, Manama, May 2011.

⁸⁹ Crisis Group interview, Manama, 4 May 2011.

⁹⁰ Crisis Group interview, Manama, 5 May 2011.

⁹¹ Crisis Group interview, Manama, 5 May 2011.

⁹² This conflation has been a repeatedly employed tool to delegitimise Al-Wifaq and the other licensed political societies. See the remarks by the National Unity Gathering's leader quoted above.

⁹³ The meeting was inconclusive and reportedly was overtaken by news that GCC troops would enter Bahrain – which they did the next day. There was an important difference in the accounts of the discussion that emerged from the meeting. In one that was subsequently used by the regime to tarnish Al-Wifaq's reputation, the Gathering's leader, Sheikh Abd-al-Latif Mahmood, claimed that in response to the call reporting the impending GCC intervention, Al-Wifaq leader Ali Salman declared that in that event he would ask Iran to come into Bahrain to protect the Shiites. The opposition's version is that Ali Salman responded that in that event, Iran would also feel justified to send in its troops. Crisis Group interviews, Abd-al-Latif Mahmood, Cairo, 9 May 2011; and a Wa'ad official present during the discussion, Manama, 5 May 2011.

⁹⁴ Crisis Group interview, Manama, May 2011.

third actor, the National Unity Gathering, has emerged, intent on limiting the opposition's ambitions even further. These developments were bound to have a decisive impact on the new round of talks initiated by the king in July.

IV. THE WAY BACK TO THE TABLE

A. THE COSTS OF CONFLICT

On 1 June, two weeks before it was set to expire, the king lifted the state of emergency. In early May, a call had gone out from parliament to extend the "national safety" law for another three months,⁹⁵ but government officials indicated at the time that the king was unlikely to accede to the request.⁹⁶ Bahrain was smarting from the hits it had taken to its reputation and economy as a result of the crackdown, and the regime apparently concluded it needed to restore a semblance of normalcy to reassure foreign businesses and retain its standing as a vibrant financial and economic centre. The protests, especially once they moved into the financial district, had scared companies with investments in the country, and the state of emergency, while allowing the regime to impose law and order, suggested that things might be calm on the surface but remained far from normal and stable. By not renewing the "national safety" law, the regime tried to signal that the situation had reached a new equilibrium enabling the safe conduct of business.

Bahrain spent years building a business-friendly reputation as a safe and secure financial haven. It had some distinct advantages over its Gulf neighbours, particularly its cosmopolitan liveability and Manama's historical authenticity compared to Dubai's or Abu Dhabi's more sterile modernity. This, in addition to good schools, attracted expatriate bankers and other white-collar workers. Manama became a haven for Middle Eastern capital fleeing Beirut just weeks after the start of the Lebanese civil war in 1975, when it had no competitors in the Gulf.

In a similarly risk-averse fashion, however, international banks in particular moved part of their staff out of the country soon after the onset of the February disturbances.⁹⁷ Their political-risk analysts watched events closely, including the government's response, and with growing doubts. Moody's downgraded Bahrain's government bond rating as recently as 26 May, reflecting "the deterioration in the banks' operating environment in light of recent social and political turmoil", and "a reassessment of the capacity of the Bahraini government to provide systemic support to the banking sector"; it downgraded the long-term deposit ratings of three Bahraini banks four days later.⁹⁸

⁹⁵ On 3 May 2011, parliament – without its eighteen Al-Wifaq representatives, who resigned in February – requested the king extend the law for several months.

⁹⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Manama, 3-5 May 2011.

⁹⁷ Crisis Group interview, veteran Gulf banker, Manama, May 2011.

⁹⁸ GulfBase, 30 May 2011, www.gulfbase.com/site/Interface/NewsArchiveDetails.aspx?n=178500.

The banking sector represents over 25 per cent of GDP. Should international banks pull out, local banks still could serve Saudi Arabia (especially the Eastern Province across the causeway) as a financial hub, but the hit would be significant, and the resulting loss of jobs would not be recouped soon if at all.

The Gulf's other financial centres, such as Abu Dhabi, Qatar and Dubai, have become magnets for Middle East finance, while Sharia-compliant investments, some of which have historically been administered from Bahrain, could be managed from other Muslim countries.⁹⁹ Analysts have been particularly interested in what BNP Paribas – a French bank whose Middle East headquarters in Bahrain employs 500 people – would do.¹⁰⁰ So far it has not announced a move, but others such as Crédit Agricole are leaving for Dubai.¹⁰¹

Events also severely hurt most other economic sectors, with the exception of the petrochemical and other export-producing industries. With country ratings falling,¹⁰² Bahrain will have difficulty attracting new investors; moreover, Bahrainis curbed spending, maximised savings and switched from long-term fixed to short-term deposits that could be withdrawn swiftly if the political situation threatened to deteriorate further. All business conferences scheduled to take place after 14 February were cancelled; only in May did a limited number of Saudi visitors return. The annual Formula One race in February was cancelled and has not been rescheduled. These factors provoked huge losses in the tourism, restaurant, retail and entertainment sectors.¹⁰³ A Sunni businessman whose family is prominent in the retail business claimed that his sales had dropped by 90 per cent, which he said meant that “the economy was coming to a standstill”. He observed that “it will take years to restore Bahrain's image abroad”.¹⁰⁴

It is not yet clear how the regime will react to this economic state of affairs. Concerns over the health of the economy might induce it to implement political reforms.

On the other hand, it might be prepared to tolerate continued hardship as a necessary price for suppressing the opposition and preventing recurring protests, while relying on high oil prices and Saudi financial support to limit economic hardship. A Western diplomat quoted a businessman as saying that “there are people in government who are actively against reconciliation, are deeply sectarian, are ready for Bahrain to take an economic and reputational hit, and prefer to pursue a divide-and-rule strategy, believing that Saudi Arabia will underwrite the economy”.¹⁰⁵ The regime's choice is likely to reflect its own internal power struggle, which in turn could be affected by developments on the ground – for example, a new round of mass protests – or a combination of pressure from the business community and Bahrain's allies, whether the U.S. or Saudi Arabia and other GCC members.

B. THE OPTION OF VIOLENCE

The lifting of the state of emergency eased repressive measures but did not end them, and the results of many aspects of the crackdown have yet to be reversed. The convictions of political leaders and activists in special security courts still stand, and they remain in prison, in some cases under life sentences.¹⁰⁶ Those who lost their jobs have yet to be rehabilitated and reinstated. Destroyed mosques and other religious structures lie in ruins, with no indication they will be rebuilt. Some things cannot be mended: the dead cannot be brought back to life, and the effects of torture cannot truly be undone, even if physical wounds heal. A community remains traumatised, fearful of further attacks.

The withdrawal of military forces from the streets after 1 June somewhat reduced the oppressive atmosphere that had prevailed since mid-March, but even in this respect, the change has not been absolute. The chief military commander indicated that public security checkpoints would not be removed immediately. Likewise, he made clear that GCC forces would not be withdrawn until a later date, and that

⁹⁹ Crisis Group interview, business analyst, Manama, 4 May 2011.

¹⁰⁰ Crisis Group interview, political analyst with a major international bank, Manama, May 2011.

¹⁰¹ Roula Khalaf and Simeon Kerr, “Bahrain: stranded on the island”, *The Financial Times*, 13 July 2011.

¹⁰² Its country rating for government debt was downgraded by several agencies during this period, for example, by Fitch Rating Agency on 6 May. This reportedly happened because wholesale banks' consolidated balance sheets shrank by 15 per cent in the year's first quarter. That said, analysts noted that Bahrain had the advantage (over Egypt and Tunisia, whose ratings took a more serious hit) of high oil prices and a promised \$1 billion in annual GCC financial assistance for ten years. *The Daily Star* (Beirut), 6 May 2011.

¹⁰³ Crisis Group interview, business analyst, Manama, 4 May 2011.

¹⁰⁴ Crisis Group interview, Manama, 7 May 2011.

¹⁰⁵ Crisis Group interview, Manama, May 2011. Moreover, Bahrain currently benefits from high oil prices. Its budget is premised on a price of \$85 per barrel, while it exceeded \$110 at times during the crisis. On 22 July, it was \$99.72.

¹⁰⁶ Moreover, while people accused of political offences after 1 June were no longer sent to the special security court, the trials that had been ongoing in these courts continued beyond that date. For example, medical personnel charged in May with attempting to overthrow the monarchy were led before the same panel of one military and two civilian judges for their first day of trial on 6 June as if the emergency law continued to be in force. Patrick Cockburn, “Horrific stories of torture in Bahrain”, *The Independent*, 7 June 2011.

some might stay on a permanent basis.¹⁰⁷ At the end of June, a Saudi official indicated that his country would withdraw most of its troops in early July,¹⁰⁸ but no such action took place. Meanwhile, interior ministry security forces remain deployed throughout the country. In July, police cars actively patrolled main highways and residential neighbourhoods, and residents observed many unmarked police cars. Checkpoints remain around the access points of what used to be the Pearl roundabout,¹⁰⁹ as well as at entrances to areas and installations that the regime considers vital.¹¹⁰

In announcing the end of the state of emergency in a 31 May speech, the king also called for dialogue, as described below, and promised: "We confirm to all journalists and media personnel in the Kingdom of Bahrain that their freedom is preserved and their rights are safeguarded. Further, no one shall be harmed due to his peaceful, civilized expression of opinion in this state of law and institutions".¹¹¹ This was a welcome departure from the violence of the preceding three months, as was the King's decision to set up an international fact-finding commission to look into possible human rights abuses in February and March,¹¹² but it is hard to see how genuine dialogue could unfold in a climate of continuing fear, intimidation and repression. The regime will therefore have to go significantly further than lifting certain repressive practices if it is serious in its declared intention to pursue a peaceful solution.

¹⁰⁷ Staff Field Marshal Khalifa bin Ahmad Al Khalifa, the Bahrain Defence Force commander-in-chief, said that checkpoints "will gradually be removed based on circumstances". About the GCC forces he said, "the Peninsula Shield Force will remain in Bahrain until their presence is no longer required. They will be redeployed gradually. Some members of these forces will remain in Bahrain, and others will go to other places. The presence and numbers of these forces will be determined by the circumstances". Quoted in *Asharq Alawsat*, 1 June 2011.

¹⁰⁸ A Saudi official was quoted as saying, "both parties have reached a decision that troops should withdraw now. The troops entered Bahrain under the request of Bahrain authorities to help the people and the government of Bahrain, and the kingdom doesn't need help anymore". He reportedly added that most troops would leave on 4 July, with an unspecified number remaining. Quoted in Nada Bakri, "Saudi forces withdrawing from Bahrain", *The New York Times*, 28 June 2011.

¹⁰⁹ Following the events of February-March, the government blocked access to the Pearl roundabout and launched a major re-configuration of the intersection that included the destruction of the emblematic Pearl sculpture in the centre.

¹¹⁰ Crisis Group email communication, Manama, 15 July 2011.

¹¹¹ Bahrain News Agency, 31 May 2011.

¹¹² King Hamad announced the creation of the "Royal Independent Fact-Finding Commission" on 29 June 2011. It was set up in coordination with UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay and is headed by Cherif Bassiouni, an international war crimes expert, with a mandate to complete its investigation by the end of October.

It has much to repair. The past few months laid the groundwork for communal violence. As the regime cracked down, it fuelled a virulent sectarian dynamic that caused untold damage to Sunni-Shiite relations. Interviewees from all sides agreed that sectarian relations had never been so bad in living memory, including after Iran's Islamic revolution and during the 1990s uprising. A liberal Sunni argued that "even if the crackdown stopped immediately, and everything returned to 'normal', the wounds will still take generations to heal".¹¹³ A civil society activist said she was particularly worried for the young generation: "Children five or ten years old have seen acts of violence; some saw their parents being arrested at gunpoint in their home and beaten. They will have psychological problems forever and will be politically radicalised when they grow up".¹¹⁴ Amid the conflict, Sunnis began circulating online lists of Shiite businesses whose owners they associated with the protests and urged their boycott; even some liberal Sunnis reportedly heeded the call.¹¹⁵

Accusations are mutual. Many Sunnis and government officials blame Shiites for having initiated a sectarian campaign and for harassing Sunnis. In their view, the month-long protests came to be dominated by a "sectarian atmosphere". Some who said they were first drawn to the demonstrations in February claim they subsequently were turned off, no longer feeling represented by the people and slogans at the Pearl roundabout. Among them, a Sunni student, a self-described leftist activist, said she later helped organise pro-government demonstrations at the (Sunni) Al-Fateh Mosque and that as a consequence Shiite friends – well-represented in her cross-sectarian leftist youth group – stopped speaking to her.¹¹⁶

An atmosphere of sectarian segregation pervaded the island. While the crackdown temporarily restored an uneasy calm, tanks were guarding key installations in central Manama and beyond well into May, with armed balaclava-clad men maintaining checkpoints at the entrances of predominantly Shiite villages and neighbourhoods. Until late April, there were checkpoints on all of the capital's major thoroughfares as well. While Sunnis generally felt protected by security forces, waving at them and chatting with them at these checkpoints, Shiites felt threatened and intimidated, generating a very tense atmosphere, especially in mixed and Shiite areas.¹¹⁷ Shiites also complained that security forces routinely converged on and beleaguered their areas at night; when people went onto the roofs of their homes to decry this apparent ghettoisation, skirmishes broke out

¹¹³ Crisis Group interview, Manama, May 2011.

¹¹⁴ Crisis Group interview, civil society activist, Manama, May 2011.

¹¹⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Sunnis of different political persuasions, Manama, May 2011.

¹¹⁶ Crisis Group interview, Manama, May 2011.

¹¹⁷ Crisis Group observations, Bahrain, early May 2011.

and injuries ensued. In July, mobile police patrols were still closely monitoring Shiite areas for any sign of people gathering or staging demonstrations, and whenever a local protest broke out, they initially sought to disperse residents with tear gas but then also with stun grenades and rubber bullets.¹¹⁸

A new practice that has particularly raised Shiite ire is the destruction of Shiite mosques/prayer houses (*huseiniya*) and meeting places (*mat'am*) on the claim they were built without a license. Shiites see this measure as a reprisal, pointing to the fact that in many cases these structures have existed for years without the law being applied, whereas it now is being implemented against all of them at once and without recourse. As anger and resentment build, the prospect of violence rises and that of genuine dialogue recedes, regardless of the king's publicly expressed commitment to the contrary. An opposition leader of Wa'ad said in early May:

If mosque destruction continues, or if the four men sentenced to death are executed [their sentences were commuted shortly afterward], who will be able to prevent violence? Every day security forces are going into villages in the evening, and then people go onto the roofs of their houses and start shouting "Allahu akbar!" Security forces fire tear gas in response. How much will people be able to take? If it continues like this, some people will turn to violence. On the internet they are already threatening to do so.¹¹⁹

While a new sustained round of protests is likely as long as fundamental issues remain unaddressed – an estimated 10,000 people went into the streets on 11 June to press for greater political rights, and subsequent Fridays have also seen protests – a number of factors account for the apparent calm and absence of significant violence, at least for now. As mentioned, security forces cordoned off and began surveilling majority-Shiite areas, gathering digital information, tapping mobile phones and monitoring the movements of "suspects". In the absence of any geological features, such as rugged mountains, that would create natural hideouts, organising violent resistance is extremely difficult as long as such security conditions prevail. Bahrainis also still live with memories of a violent intifada in the 1990s that failed to produce the desired political changes and ended in long prison sentences or exile for participants.

The prospect of a violent popular reaction is further diminished by the fact that Bahrainis generally are not well-armed (in contrast to other countries in the Arabian Peninsula, such as Yemen), and that obtaining weapons is not easy. Plus, there are clear obstacles to a more generalised militarisation.

The country is an archipelago of 33 islands; the largest, the island of Bahrain, covers an area of only 374 square miles (990 sq. km.) and is accessible by land only via the causeway from Saudi Arabia. As a result, it is very difficult to smuggle weapons overland; likewise, waters around Bahrain are tightly patrolled, with a nightly curfew on maritime activities.

That said, there are reports that at least part of the population is beginning to arm itself. Sunnis, frightened by protester tactics and demands and well connected to the security apparatus, which has virtually no Shiite officers, could use their relations to gain access to weapons. Moreover, it is an open secret that many residents of Al-Rifah, a mostly Sunni area in which the royal family lives, keep weapons in their homes.¹²⁰ In turn, many Sunnis and some Shiites also accuse – without corroboration – Al-Haq leader Hasan Mushayma of having sought weapons from Hizbollah during a stopover in Beirut on his way back from London to Manama in late February 2011.¹²¹ What is more, geography hinders but does not rule out smuggling; in particular, the coastlines of several Shiite villages, such as Sitra (itself an island), are difficult to control. Iraq and Yemen, but also Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, have large black markets for weapons, with leftovers from previous wars for sale. If Shiite communities decided to arm themselves, they probably could do so, although only to a limited extent and likely not with heavy weapons.¹²²

Easier to organise in the short term would be a campaign of urban violence. Gulf security officials appear concerned that a radicalised minority among Shiites could resort to tactics such as bombings, assassinations or kidnappings, particularly of members of the Al Khalifa, either at home or abroad.¹²³ Youth groups also increasingly are threatening that, with avenues for peaceful protest closed and a tough security clampdown targeting them, they might change their tactics and resort to violence.¹²⁴

The most likely scenario for Bahrain's short-term future is a mix of politics and street protests, the latter designed

¹²⁰ This was one reason why the youth groups' march on Riffa was considered so dangerous, as panicked residents could have used their weapons against them. Crisis Group interview, Sunni politician, Manama, May 2011.

¹²¹ Crisis Group interviews, Manama, May 2011. Bahrain's chief military commander vaguely insinuated that Mushayma had conspired with Hizbollah to create unrest in Bahrain: "A leader of the sedition that is in custody had come from London, and he stopped in Lebanon for two days for a purpose that is clear to everyone. We know where he went and where he came from". Staff Field Marshal Khalifa bin Ahmad Al Khalifa, quoted in *Asharq Alawsat*, 1 June 2011.

¹²² Crisis Group interview, Iraqi Shiite activist, Europe, April 2011.

¹²³ Crisis Group interview, Gulf security analyst, Manama, May 2011.

¹²⁴ Crisis Group interview, youth activist, Manama, May 2011.

¹¹⁸ Crisis Group email communication, Manama, 15 July 2011.

¹¹⁹ Crisis Group interview, Manama, May 2011.

to reinforce the opposition's much weakened position. In June and July, the types of protests to which Bahrain had grown accustomed over the past few decades returned, suggesting that the regime would again tolerate the familiar, while the opposition would continue to resort to its time-honed tactics, shunning violence. Beyond the short term, however, much depends on the nature and outcome of the national dialogue that the king decreed.

C. THE OPTION OF DIALOGUE

Given the events of February to May, the kingdom's return to dialogue was perhaps surprisingly swift; it apparently was induced by economic considerations and pressure from the U.S. and UK. In early May, government officials began to signal the need for a new effort, while the opposition indicated it might agree to participate in a national dialogue if it felt the conditions were right.¹²⁵ It became clear immediately, however, that, given the shift in the power balance between regime and opposition, any new dialogue would assume an altogether different form from either the informal deliberations in February-March or the parliamentary debates of yesteryear. The earlier talks had flowed sinuously from preceding communications between Al-Wifaq and the king and his son. Now, however, following the crackdown, the king announced a "national consensus dialogue" unilaterally and gave indications how it should be shaped even before its participants were to be chosen. In his 31 May speech, he stated:

[W]e instruct both the executive and legislative branches to call for a dialogue of national consensus on the optimal situation for the Kingdom of Bahrain, and to take all necessary measures to prepare for this comprehensive, serious dialogue – without preconditions – to begin early July of this year, in which all people could participate with their vision of the future Their recommendations – upon which we hope you will reach a consensus – will drive the pace of reforms towards further growth on all levels, consolidate the pillars of the reform project, and achieve the aspirations of the kind people of Bahrain for peace, justice, and the continuation of the process of development and growth. The recommendations of the dialogue are to be submitted to us and be presented to the constitutional institutions, each in its area of authority.¹²⁶

In other words – and loosely interpreted – the government would organise and lead a broadly based dialogue whose participants would be empowered to make recommendations to the king. In turn, the king's approval would be required for their implementation by the government. There

was no mention of a popular referendum to ratify any approved changes.

The exercise kicked off on 5 July in Manama's central library under the chairmanship of the speaker of parliament, Khalifa bin Ahmed al-Dhahrani, who was appointed by the king. Titled the "National Dialogue", it set up its own website,¹²⁷ which has provided the (pre-set) agenda, the participant list and daily reports on progress. Sessions have ranged from "governance" to "electoral system", "human rights" and "women, special needs and children's rights". The handpicked participants included over 100 societies (both political and non-political), companies and media outlets, as well as the two houses of parliament and municipal councils. Together with public figures, these institutions accounted for some 280 participating individuals.

Of these, only a handful belonged to the alliance of seven licensed opposition societies, which were asked to send five representatives each. One of these societies (Islamic Action)¹²⁸ could not come to a decision on participating because all its leaders were in prison; a second (National Democratic Gathering)¹²⁹ declined the invitation, arguing that a real dialogue could only be held if the government agreed to release all political prisoners and end repression, human rights abuses and the defamatory media campaign against the opposition.¹³⁰ Of the others, Al-Wifaq had only four members present, its fifth nominee being in prison. Some of the public figures also are considered close to the opposition, but after having eighteen of parliament's 40 deputies (based on an unfair electoral law), the opposition was reduced to roughly 10 per cent of participants in a national dialogue, and these were empowered to vote on recommendations only.

An opposition society whose presence came somewhat as a surprise was Wa'ad (National Democratic Action), a secular leftist group.¹³¹ The government had revoked its licence as part of the crackdown in March and arrested its leader, Ibrahim Sharif, while a pro-regime mob ransacked its offices. The society got its licence back in June, and it then decided to participate in the National Dialogue, even though Sharif remained in jail, sentenced to five years by a special security court. A senior Wa'ad official said the group did not want to be seen as an obstacle to dialogue and, moreover, the dialogue would give it the kind of

¹²⁷ www.nd.bh/en/index.php.

¹²⁸ Islamic Action is the formal name of a group known as the Shihazis. See Crisis Group Report, *The Bahrain Revolt*, op. cit., pp. 15-16.

¹²⁹ The National Democratic Gathering society is a small leftist splinter group of Wa'ad. Ibid, p. 16, fn. 99.

¹³⁰ See the society's website, www.tjm3.org/view.php?page=mk5211; and for earlier views on the society's positions, Crisis Group interview, National Democratic Gathering leader, Manama, May 2011.

¹³¹ See Crisis Group Report, *The Bahrain Revolt*, op. cit., pp. 16-17.

¹²⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Manama, first half of May 2011.

¹²⁶ Bahrain News Agency, 31 May 2011.

publicity in the media from which it had been blocked since the crackdown.¹³² A close observer of the political scene reported that, by joining, the group may also have thought it could pave the way for its leader's release.¹³³

An even bigger surprise was Al-Wifaq's participation. Reportedly, its leaders decided to accept the invitation only at the last minute, after having first indicated they would not join as long as repressive measures continued.¹³⁴ Officials cited pressure from the U.S. and UK, which saw the dialogue as a way out of the political quandary created by the protests and ensuing crackdown.¹³⁵ A senior Al-Wifaq official, Khalil al-Marzouq, the former deputy parliamentary speaker, delivered an opening salvo against the event even as he announced that his society would join it: "The main issue is that this dialogue is not representative of the people. It is an ideas forum, rather than a people's representation. So we will ask for a referendum like they had in Morocco on Friday. If you want to have a 'national consensus', as they say, then you need a vote".¹³⁶

Privately, Al-Wifaq officials indicated they did not want to be seen as standing aside or obstructing the dialogue, but to work from within and have their demands heard in this public forum and the media. They also made clear, however, that the group would not sign any proposal that did not accommodate their earlier demands, and they held out the option of resigning if they doubted or disliked the outcome. They added that they saw the exercise as merely a first step in a longer process, to be followed by a meaningful direct dialogue between the opposition and the crown prince or another senior member of the royal family with real power.¹³⁷ In the event, Al-Wifaq's four representatives resigned, on 17 July, barely two weeks into the event; delegation leader Marzouq said the government had "disregarded the opposition's efforts to make the talks meaningful".¹³⁸

Mansour al-Jamri, *Al-Wasat's* former editor, who had been forced out of his job (see above) and who participated in the dialogue, described the proceedings, which appeared to consist of a series of brief speeches more than a discussion, as follows:

Each person speaks for a few minutes, and it is usually not possible to speak again as you have to wait for your turn Some give up as they wait, and the five hours end before their turn comes up There is no chance for give and take, as the number of people in each workshop is huge,¹³⁹ and every person speaks without being able to come back to respond if someone comments on his or her points Usually pro-government participants (around 85 per cent of the attendants) dominate the start, middle and end of the talking. They will rise up against any person trying to cross what the government considers as red lines. Virtually all the opposition's demands are red lines.¹⁴⁰

The regime-decreed "national consensus dialogue" runs the risk of becoming an exercise in treading water, while creating the illusion of forward movement, mostly for external consumption. The forum is far from being truly inclusive and can therefore not accomplish a national consensus on any of the topics under discussion. Nor does it provide for dialogue. As one informed observer put it:

Ultimately, stability in Bahrain will require social reconciliation and political restructuring. The National Dialogue will not deliver this, and it may in fact work to undermine the prospects for national reconciliation and reform The National Dialogue transforms citizens insisting on their political rights into subjects pe-

the dialogue would "not reach a radical political solution to the crisis in Bahrain but instead complicate the political crisis". It added that it was "vastly under-represented and marginalised in the dialogue ... whose results have been determined in advance" and did not want to be linked to a process "whose results could be far removed from the political will". "Bahrain Shiite opposition pulls out of talks", Agence France-Presse, 17 July 2011. A participant in the dialogue said that the trigger for Al-Wifaq's decision to withdraw was the reference by one of the Sunni participants to Shiites as *rawafedh* (rejectionists), meaning those who rejected the Caliphates of Abu Bakr and Omar after the Prophet Muhammad's death. Post to the Gulf2000 listserv by Mansour al-Jamri, 12 July 2011, quoted with the author's permission. In Iraq, that term gained prominence when Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a Salafi jihadist and leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq in 2003-2006, used it as a justification for killing Shiites, thus triggering a sectarian war. See Crisis Group Middle East and North Africa Report N°52, *The Next Iraqi War? Sectarianism and Civil Conflict*, 27 February 2006, p. 14. Shiites deem its use extremely inflammatory.

¹³⁹ Four workshops meet in four separate halls of the central library, each with 50 to 80 participants.

¹⁴⁰ Extracted from a post to the Gulf2000 listserv by Mansour Al-Jamri, 8 July 2011, quoted with the author's permission.

¹³² Crisis Group telephone interview, senior Wa'ad official, Manama, 8 July 2011.

¹³³ Crisis Group email communication, Manama, 15 July 2011.

¹³⁴ On 10 June, the country's most senior Shiite religious leader, Sheikh Isa Qasem, told worshippers there was no chance for dialogue as long as security forces continued to carry out repressive measures. Quoted by Associated Press, 11 June 2011.

¹³⁵ Roula Khalaf, "US picking itself up in Bahrain", *The Financial Times* (blog), 5 July 2011, quoting an unnamed opposition politician as saying, "the argument of the Americans is that we would be blamed for failure of the dialogue so tactically we had to be part of it".

¹³⁶ Quoted in Bradley Hope, "'Healing process' is aim of Bahrain dialogue", *The National*, 3 July 2011.

¹³⁷ Crisis Group telephone interview, Al-Wifaq official, Manama, 8 July 2011.

¹³⁸ Quoted in "Bahrain Shiites pull out of reconciliation talks", Associated Press, 17 July 2011. In a statement, Al-Wifaq said

titoning the King. It is a parody of the opposition's key demand: A constitutive assembly to realise a genuine constitutional monarchy, a system where elected representatives in a fully empowered legislative assembly could effectively hold such a "national dialogue" and actually have the popular legitimacy and political clout to deliver on it.¹⁴¹

The only sustainable way forward is for the regime and opposition to engage in direct talks on gradual but meaningful reform. This could only take place in an environment in which the opposition can express its views without fear of arrest and intimidation. A critical first step would be for the government to release all political prisoners, meaning those held for peacefully expressing their beliefs rather than for committing violence, including most importantly the 21 opposition leaders, political activists and human rights defenders sentenced on 22 June.

For negotiations to succeed, they should resume at the point where the semi-secret talks between Al-Wifaq and the crown prince broke off, ie, with the seven issues that the crown prince said, in his 13 March televised statement, could be included in reform negotiations: an elected parliament with full vested powers and prerogatives; a government reflecting the will of the people; fairly demarcated electoral constituencies; the naturalisation question; combating financial and administrative corruption; the issue of state properties; and a strategy to combat sectarian polarisation and animosities. The crown prince added that any agreement resulting from the dialogue could be subject to a popular referendum.¹⁴²

Anything short of agreeing to this agenda will not be taken seriously by the opposition, if only because this is what has been offered before. Moreover, the licensed opposition groups run the risk of losing their popular base if they are seen to be taking part in regime-sponsored exercises whose expected outcome is likely to fall far short of even their minimal demands, especially if jailed opposition and community leaders are not freed.

That said, there is reason to doubt the ruling family's willingness in the foreseeable future to return to these seven points, or to any form of direct talk with the opposition. The faction that now de facto controls the country – the prime minister and the two Bin Ahmad brothers (the Bahrain Defence Force commander-in-chief and the minister of the Royal Court) – together with Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states are considerably less inclined to make concessions that in their view could significantly weaken the king and the institution of the monarchy.

Moreover, as a result of the protests, a third factor has been added to the mix: the National Unity Gathering, described above. Al-Wifaq will now have to deal with an organised Sunni community that has expressed support for some reforms while remaining fiercely loyal to the Al Khalifas.¹⁴³

In light of the regime's expected resistance to genuine reform, two key ingredients will be needed to maximise chances for a peaceful resolution. One concerns the opposition. It will have to acknowledge that large parts of the Sunni community are afraid of losing their status and facing retribution if the Shiites gain a greater, let alone a dominant, political role. It will therefore have to work hard to restore its bonds with the Sunnis and offer guarantees it will not carry out retaliations if and when it gains power. It might also have to agree – by not publicly opposing it – to an extended GCC troop presence in Bahrain, as long as these troops remain in barracks and refrain from policing responsibilities. This could give Saudi Arabia and its GCC partners, as well as the ruling family's hardline faction, greater confidence in Manama's continued alliance with Riyadh and assuage fears – founded or not – that Bahrain might move excessively close to Iran. The second ingredient is robust Western, and notably U.S. backing for political reform.

¹⁴¹ Extracted from a post to the Gulf2000 listserv by Kristin Diwan, 1 July 2011, quoted with the author's permission.

¹⁴² Bahrain News Agency, 13 March 2011.

¹⁴³ Al-Wifaq and Gathering leaders met several times before the March crackdown; although they found some common ground, their meetings ultimately were inconclusive. A National Unity Gathering participant in the talks said, "we went to Al-Wifaq and the other six societies three or four times. We said we should reach a joint agreement to present to the government. We agreed with most of their demands, except the government's resignation and elections to a constituent assembly. We cannot reach in a day what took the UK centuries. At first, they went along with us, but then they hardened their position". Crisis Group interview, Manama, 7 May 2011.

V. THE U.S. ROLE

Following on the heels of the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions, the Bahrain events presented a serious dilemma for Washington. The U.S. has huge assets in Bahrain – its Fifth Fleet is based there¹⁴⁴ – and has a close, long-standing relationship with the Al Khalifas it is loath to jeopardise. Perhaps most importantly, the administration does not wish to further harm its pivotal relations with Saudi Arabia, already significantly undercut by Riyadh's anger at Washington's abandonment of its long-term Egyptian ally, Mubarak.¹⁴⁵

For reasons noted above, Saudi Arabia views Bahrain as an existential issue, and any significant divergence of views between Washington and Riyadh over it could have near-fatal consequences to their relationship. Moreover, although the administration concluded that – contrary to Saudi assertions – there was no evidence of direct Iranian meddling in Bahrain, it nonetheless agreed with Riyadh that Tehran would benefit from instability there. Also factoring in Washington's calculations was the realisation that the Bahraini military, unlike its Tunisian and Egyptian counterparts, would not desert its political leadership but rather rally around it. At the same time, the U.S. has sought to make clear that it supports the aspirations of protesters region-wide and fears being accused of inconsistent behaviour – or, worse, outright hypocrisy – if it comes out firmly against regime repression of opposition movements in Libya and Syria, but not in Bahrain.

In seeking to balance these competing considerations, the administration produced an equivocal position that fully satisfied no one. It criticised the regime's handling of the protesters, but relatively mildly and while always acknowledging the legitimacy both of its concern for law and order and of its fears of potential Iranian meddling. By the same token, it backed political reforms, though seemed to signal that it would be satisfied if these led to a constitutional monarchy with an elected prime minister as opposed to more radical steps that might result in the end of the monarchy and the establishment of a democratic republic. In shaping its policy, the administration banked on the king's and crown prince's apparent reform plan which, it believed, could potentially satisfy the main opposition groups' demands. From the start, therefore, and rather than support the protests, Washington threw its weight behind the crown prince's efforts to jump-start a substantive reform dialogue with the opposition. It also held to the view that the key was to back a gradual process that, over time, would lead to a constitutional monarchy.

But Washington's position was to become increasingly uncomfortable early on, as the regime resorted to excessive force. Human rights activists and others pressured it to take a tougher stance, pointing out that its Middle East policy otherwise would ring hollow. At the same time, it was becoming apparent that efforts to get formal talks off the ground were failing. Administration officials worked hard to persuade the two sides to bridge their differences and come to the table – through phone calls from President Obama, Vice President Biden and others to the king, crown prince and others in Manama, and visits by senior U.S. officials, especially virtual shuttle diplomacy by Assistant Secretary of State Jeffrey Feltman. Indeed, according to participants in the informal discussions, Feltman was in Manama as Saudi troops rolled in, trying to mediate a last-minute accord between the regime and Al-Wifaq.¹⁴⁶

In the wake of the crackdown, the Obama administration voiced its concerns publicly, albeit only regarding some of the regime's abuses. It remained largely silent about others, as well as about the overall pattern of sectarian-inspired, vendetta-like repression. For example, it protested the detention of a blogger (subsequently released) and the announced banning of Al-Wifaq; likewise, it publicly called for due process for those detained and an investigation into the four deaths in custody.¹⁴⁷ Yet, it said little about the excessive use of force, torture, the loyalty-oath campaign, job dismissals or the four death sentences.¹⁴⁸ Nor did the U.S. suggest that Bahrain be sanctioned in any way for the killing of protesters and other human rights abuses, a position at odds with its approach to Libya and Syria – and a position vehemently criticised as a double standard by Iran and Hizbollah,¹⁴⁹ but also by international human rights organisations.¹⁵⁰

Some officials privately justified this relatively muted response with the argument that, given Washington's closeness to the ruling family, quiet urging would be more effective, and more helpful in preserving U.S. interests, than public scolding. Its strategy, these officials indicated, was to bolster the regime's confidence by making clear to it and to Bahrain's Gulf neighbours that the administration did not support regime change. To an extent, this posture seemed to reflect internal disagreements. Some in the administration reportedly pushed for a more muscular critique of the regime

¹⁴⁴ From its base in Bahrain, the fleet patrols the waters of the Gulf.

¹⁴⁵ This section is based on multiple Crisis Group interviews, U.S. government officials, Washington and Manama, May 2011.

¹⁴⁶ Crisis Group interview, civil society activist, Manama, May 2011.

¹⁴⁷ See the U.S. State Department's daily press briefings on 30 March, 3 April, 14 April and 3 May 2011, www.state.gov.

¹⁴⁸ In the case of the four death sentences, U.S. officials merely criticised Bahrain for the speed with which the verdicts were reached. Agence France-Presse, 30 April 2011. The death sentences were later commuted to life imprisonment.

¹⁴⁹ See www.presstv.ir/detail/172593.html and www.iloubnan.info/politics/actualite/id/58005.

¹⁵⁰ See, for example, Joshua Colangelo-Bryan, "Back human rights in Bahrain", *Politico*, 11 April 2011.

while those who ultimately won the argument feared such an approach risked jeopardising relations with Saudi Arabia and other important Gulf allies. However, they too insisted that in the long term Bahrain could not expect to receive continued U.S. security assistance if it engaged in a consistent pattern of human rights abuse and failed to initiate meaningful political reform.¹⁵¹

U.S. officials maintain that they consistently told the ruling family and government that the country's problems could not be solved through security measures but only through reform. Defence Secretary Gates reportedly urged the king to think in "evolutionary, not revolutionary" terms and to consider making certain unspecified changes in the government.¹⁵² U.S. officials strongly backed the crown prince's initiative in February and March and, they say, persuaded him to embrace most of Al-Wifaq's demands, while pressing Al-Wifaq and the other six licensed opposition groups to agree to formal talks and drop their demand for elections, based on redrawn district boundaries, to a constituent assembly.

At a broader level, and though it shared concern about growing Iranian influence, the U.S. took the view that by suppressing Shiite political aspirations the regime risked boosting Tehran's role. Traditionally, the country's Shiite population by and large has not seen Iran as a role model and not viewed Iran's supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, as its religious reference (opting instead for Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani in Najaf), even if Khamenei has a substantial following in Bahrain. However, U.S. officials fear, the more Bahrain becomes polarised along sectarian lines and the more repressive the regime's measures, the more likely Shiites will turn to Iran for support.¹⁵³

In a 19 May speech devoted to the Arab spring, Obama offered the administration's most detailed description of its position on Bahrain, which many saw as an attempt to counter accusations that the U.S. was sacrificing its professed support for democratic movements in the Middle

East at the altar of its geo-strategic interests in the Gulf. He said:

Bahrain is a longstanding partner, and we are committed to its security. We recognise that Iran has tried to take advantage of the turmoil there, and that the Bahraini government has a legitimate interest in the rule of law. Nevertheless, we have insisted both publicly and privately that mass arrests and brute force are at odds with the universal rights of Bahrain's citizens, and ... such steps will not make legitimate calls for reform go away. The only way forward is for the government and opposition to engage in a dialogue, and you can't have a real dialogue when parts of the peaceful opposition are in jail. The government must create the conditions for dialogue, and the opposition must participate to forge a just future for all Bahrainis.¹⁵⁴

The speech represented a subtle shift in the administration's approach. It offered a more robust criticism of the regime's crackdown than it had before; it also pressed the regime to move forward with its professed support for reform by creating the necessary conditions for dialogue, including the release of political prisoners. The king apparently took part of the message to heart (albeit part only), lifting the state of emergency two weeks before the law's three-month term was set to expire and announcing the start of dialogue by July 2011; that said, he did not order the release of opposition leaders.

Although the speech was welcomed by many among Bahrain's opposition¹⁵⁵ as well as by the regime,¹⁵⁶ the real test of U.S. intentions – and effectiveness – will be the amount of energy it exerts to get genuine dialogue between the regime and opposition back on track. Obama's decision to meet with Crown Prince Salman during the latter's visit to Washington on 7 June was useful in this respect. It helped boost the most prominent of the regime's pro-reform elements at a time when he was seeking to recover

¹⁵¹ U.S. officials indicated they were closely monitoring Bahrain's use of U.S.-supplied security equipment. Most violence was perpetrated by the internal security forces, not the military, which has been the principal recipient of U.S. security assistance, but the military was directly involved in the post-crackdown show of force. These officials suggested that Saudi Arabia could easily replace the U.S. in supplying Bahrain with military hardware in the event of a cut-off.

¹⁵² Whether Gates called for the prime minister's resignation is unclear, but this was one of the protesters' key demands, and it appears consistent with the type of reform advocated by the U.S. and the crown prince.

¹⁵³ The regime argues, by contrast, that it is precisely by opening up the political system that Iran could gain influence through its perceived proxies, the Shiite Islamist opposition groups.

¹⁵⁴ Obama also stated that Bahrain's Shiites "must never have their mosques destroyed". The speech can be found at: www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/19/remarks-president-middle-east-and-north-africa.

¹⁵⁵ According to an independent source in Bahrain, the Obama speech was well received by the opposition, and "many people believe that positive changes started to occur after it". Crisis Group email communication, Manama, 15 July 2011. See also, Roy Gutman, "Obama slams Bahrain's Crackdown", *McClatchy Newspapers*, 19 May 2011.

¹⁵⁶ State media praised the renewed U.S. security commitment to Bahrain in the speech, playing down Obama's criticism. See "Bahrain welcomes Obama's speech, reiterates commitment to dialogue", *Gulfnews.com*, 20 May 2011.

from the political repercussions flowing from his inability to deliver a deal with the opposition.¹⁵⁷

That said, the U.S. subsequently seemed to endorse the “national consensus dialogue” decreed by the king and chaired by the speaker of parliament; moreover, it pressured Al-Wifaq to participate, applauding when the group announced it would. The State Department spokesman said before the event’s 5 July opening, “Al-Wifaq’s participation adds an important voice of Bahrain’s political opposition to a process that has the potential to serve as a vehicle for reform and reconciliation”. Moreover, the dialogue shows “the government of Bahrain is taking concrete steps which could contribute to national unity and stability”.¹⁵⁸ In endorsing the “national consensus dialogue”, however, the U.S. took the risk of appearing to embrace an exercise that clearly had little to do with either consensus or dialogue.

The U.S. is unlikely to significantly alter its approach toward the Bahraini regime, as it did toward its counterparts in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria and, to some extent, Yemen. Its policy is hemmed in by strategic interests in the Gulf, which have produced the prevalent view in Washington that it should keep its relationship with Saudi Arabia on an even keel. But failure to effectively pressure its ally risks backfiring.¹⁵⁹ Continued repression at home might buy short-term stability but at greater long-term costs, including the growing possibility that the absence of meaningful reform could cause Bahraini Shiites to withdraw from the political process and perhaps even turn to Iran – precisely the opposite of what Washington purportedly wishes to accomplish.

As the previous, partially successful U.S. intervention on human rights referred to above suggests, Washington maintains real leverage on the regime – whether exercised

through public or private pressure. This should come as no surprise: the U.S. provides Bahrain with some funding for military purchases under its Foreign Military Financing program (\$19 million in 2010) and also military training assistance. The U.S. should suspend all security assistance and condition its resumption on explicit human rights benchmarks (notably the release of prisoners detained in connection with pro-democracy and anti-government protests unless there is evidence they may have been responsible for a recognisable criminal offense), as well as on initiation of a genuine political dialogue. More generally, the U.S. could do more to ensure basic adherence to human rights standards by publicly criticising government behaviour, including but not limited to arbitrary arrest, incommunicado detention, torture, excessive use of force and suppression of free expression and peaceful assembly. Finally, it should consider exploring alternative options for basing the Fifth Fleet.

¹⁵⁷ Following the crown prince’s visit, the White House announced: “To create the conditions for a successful dialogue, the President emphasised the importance of following through on the [Bahraini] government’s commitment to ensuring that those responsible for human rights abuses will be held accountable. The President noted that, as a long-standing partner of Bahrain, the United States believes that the stability of Bahrain depends upon respect for the universal rights of the people of Bahrain, including the right to free speech and peaceful assembly, and a process of meaningful reform that is responsive to the aspirations of all”. White House media statement, 7 June 2011. UK Prime Minister David Cameron also received the crown prince amid wide public criticism. See *The Guardian*, 20 May 2011.

¹⁵⁸ Quoted in Bradley Hope, “‘Healing process’ is aim of Bahrain dialogue”, *The National*, 3 July 2011.

¹⁵⁹ This argument is elaborated by Toby Jones, who additionally has made a case for the elimination of the Fifth Fleet, not just its removal from Bahrain, based on the Bahraini regime’s brutal behaviour. Toby Jones, “Time to disband the Bahrain-based U.S. Fifth Fleet”, *The Atlantic*, 10 June 2011.

VI. CONCLUSION

There have been no winners in the confrontation between regime and protesters in Bahrain. The failure of informal talks between the crown prince and the seven political societies, as well as the ferocity of the crackdown from mid-March onward, have turned the island from a relatively open polity into the most repressive of the six GCC states. It has taken on some recognisable features of a dictatorship, in which anyone who voices criticism of the regime faces arrest, and public life is dominated by fear and signed “loyalty” oaths. And while the regime may feel it brought the opposition to heel – for now – there are no grounds for the royal family to chalk this up as a victory. To the contrary, it has brought upon the country serious economic and reputational harm, as well as the prospect for long-term instability.

Yet, if no one won, some lost more than others, at least in the short term. Those who took the risk of alienating their core constituencies by reaching across the table took the fall. The crown prince appears to be marginalised within the royal family, at least for now, dispatched to market the regime’s avowed pro-reform credentials in foreign capitals but not given a role at home, not even in the phony “national consensus dialogue”. Al-Wifaq still appears to enjoy a significant popular base, but few of the many Pearl roundabout protesters who opposed dialogue with the regime will now embrace the group’s continued preparedness to once again sit down for serious discussions should the opportunity arise; if opposition leaders stay in prison and other repressive measures stay in place while Al-Wifaq continues to talk to the regime, it might witness a serious erosion in its public support. In this sense, the radicals “won”.

But the victories are likely to be Pyrrhic. The regime has bought neither significant time, nor social peace or stability by unleashing its security forces and allowing its Gulf allies to extend a protective military umbrella. Given their demographic size, Bahrain’s Shiites will not disappear, and their grievances cannot be ignored; if left unaddressed, their legitimate demands are likely to re-emerge in more forceful and assertive ways. As for the protesters and the unlicensed political societies, they will not be able to circumvent the reality that Bahrain remains deeply embedded in the Gulf states’ security fold, which limits its foreign policy manoeuvring room and, as the events of the past few months have shown, also shapes how the regime deals with the opposition. By calling for a republican form of government, they would keep the pressure on the licensed opposition groups and ensure those groups do not excessively dilute their demands, but they would also run the serious risk of undermining any prospect for genuine progress.

To avoid endemic instability and potential violence, all sides to the conflict should re-focus their attempts to reach a

mutually acceptable compromise. The evident limitations of the “national consensus dialogue” point to the need for a quite different sort of effort. Opposition groups and unaffiliated demonstrators clearly should strive to keep any future protests peaceful, but the preponderance of the burden lies on the regime. With opposition leaders in prison, hiding and exile or on the defensive, it will be up to the regime to take the initiative to launch a new, truly inclusive dialogue and recommit itself to moving forward meaningfully on political reform, with a constitutional monarchy as the goal. To that end, it should convene a meeting with key representative actors after Ramadan (at the end of August) to work out modalities of such a dialogue.

In the meantime, the regime should take immediate steps to create an environment more conducive to talks. These include measures to undo some of the repressive actions taken during the crackdown: freeing all those who were jailed for peacefully expressing their views, including those already sentenced; ending all trials by special security courts and retrying those convicted by those courts in regular criminal courts; and reinstating those dismissed for their participation in peaceful protests, absence from work during the height of the crisis or other reasons linked with the February and March events. By the same token, it should hold accountable members of the security forces for actions in contravention of basic human rights. Finally, it should give the Bassiouni commission of investigation full access, make public its findings once it completes its work and implement its recommendations. Measures also will be required to defuse sectarian polarisation, such as halting the destruction of Shiite mosques and ending discrimination in government recruitment.

The international community, and notably Bahrain’s allies, have an important role to play in this regard. Besides monitoring regime adherence to international human rights standards, they ought to encourage initiation of a different kind of inclusive dialogue along the lines described above.

Manama/Washington/Brussels, 28 July 2011

APPENDIX A

MAP OF BAHRAIN



APPENDIX B

ABOUT THE INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 130 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a twelve-page monthly bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in all the most significant situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports and briefing papers are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on the website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

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Crisis Group's international headquarters are in Brussels, with major advocacy offices in Washington DC (where it is based as a legal entity) and New York, a smaller one in London and liaison presences in Moscow and Beijing. The organisation currently operates nine regional offices (in Bishkek, Bogotá, Dakar, Islamabad, Istanbul, Jakarta, Nairobi, Pristina and Tbilisi) and has local field representation in fourteen additional locations (Baku, Bangkok, Beirut, Bujumbura, Damascus, Dili, Jerusalem, Kabul, Kathmandu, Kinshasa, Port-au-Prince, Pretoria, Sarajevo and Seoul). Crisis Group currently covers some 60 areas of actual or potential conflict across four continents. In Africa, this includes Burundi, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Kenya, Liberia, Madagascar, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, Uganda and Zimbabwe; in Asia, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Burma/Myanmar, Indonesia, Kashmir, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz-

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CRISIS GROUP REPORTS AND BRIEFINGS ON THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA SINCE 2008

Arab-Israeli Conflict

- Ruling Palestine I: Gaza Under Hamas*, Middle East Report N°73, 19 March 2008 (also available in Arabic).
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- Egypt's Muslim Brothers: Confrontation or Integration?*, Middle East/North Africa Report N°76, 18 June 2008 (also available in Arabic).
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